

“Our Life Together”
September 26, 2021
Scripture: James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

I have often wished I had the ability to be shocking. I just don't have it in me to say things calculated to make people cringe. Maybe it's my Puritanical upbringing or maybe my natural shyness, but I just can't bring myself to say things like that. Jesus didn't suffer from that problem. He must have known how strange it sounded to his disciples telling them to sever limbs and gouge out eyes. It's a passage that really does feel wrong. And I've noticed a lot of other people see it that way, too.

Most of the commentaries I've read about it tend to gloss over that part of his words. They don't even attempt to interpret it usually. It's just sort of a random weird thing Jesus says that makes everyone in the room look around nervously. But I don't think it's random. I think Jesus is trying to shock them; he wants to shake them up. We should remember he says these things as part of a longer scene that started with the disciples arguing among themselves over who's the greatest. Jesus knows they don't get it and he's starting to be a little frustrated with them.

What he may be trying to tell them, in this graphic and grisly way, is God's kingdom requires something of them. They cannot go on behaving the way they always have or the way they see people in power behaving around them. They must be awake to the ways they are tempted to grasp at things that cause harm, or tempted to walk toward things that lead them off the path, or be distracted by things that look exciting or interesting or lucrative. If their hands, their feet, their eyes cause them to stumble, they must find ways to let them go. It's not to be understood literally. I really shouldn't need to say that, but too many times people of faith have taken Jesus' words at face value without understanding them more deeply.

This is a call to self-examination, to look closely at what we do and why. And it's a warning. When we prevent even the smallest among us from knowing God's presence we do terrible damage to our souls. It would be better for us to be attached to a millstone and thrown into the sea. History is riddled with examples of how children have been mistreated on behalf of the church; I don't need to recite them...I'm not here to shock you. These little ones he mentions, the ones we encourage to trust him, are counting on us to treat them with dignity and grace. For some this may be the only place they can find it.

So, we don't need to take his words exactly literally but we absolutely must take them seriously. For Jesus this is all that matters. His followers must understand that who they are and what they do will reveal God's kingdom in the world...or not. The stakes couldn't be higher. We can understand, I think, why he might resort to hyperbole to get his point across. There's nothing more important for the future than what he's trying to teach them. And it's worth noting he's

talking privately with his disciples, not to the crowds. This is wisdom for the community of believers; it's for those of us who have made our commitment to Jesus and are seeking God's kingdom.

Jesus' words should lead us into ourselves, our motives, our stumblings, and into community. Because we do this not just for the sake of self-improvement, we're here for each other. And by being faithful in our life together we can be available to bring hope and healing to the world.

That's what James is talking about when he tells those who suffer to pray and those who are cheerful to sing and those who are sick to be surrounded by the elders who can anoint them. Prayer, song, anointing, these are the elements of community. When in need, we're called to immerse ourselves in our life together. We're called to pray for one another. Prayer is a way of drawing us into community, even when we pray alone. We're never isolated when we turn our hearts to prayer and join our spirits with God's Spirit. We may even find healing for those times we stumble through our prayers for one another.

As Jesus and James taught, as we discover more clearly every day, everything we do and all that we are is connected. The ways we're tempted, the things that draw us away from community, cut us off from the whole kingdom of God. Our life together represents the world's hope: hope for justice, hope for compassion, hope for love. Whatever we need to let go, to sever, to maintain our life together, the sacrifice is worth it. All that matters is we enter God's kingdom, so that through our life together God's presence will be revealed.

Amen