

Mark 9 Be at Peace

Our reading today seems like a random assortment of topics ranging from fellowship, to sin and its consequences, to a salt illustration.

Yet the text offers us a link. A bookend. The first bookend we heard last week, where the disciples were arguing amongst themselves. It's a bookend of conflict at the start. The last bookend of this section of Mark is here in our text today, at the very end: "be at peace with one another."

Which is an invitation to see everything in between those bookends as having something to do with the disciples and their arguing - their *not* being at peace with one another.

And so the first event, them trying to stop someone else driving out demons, then fits into this context: they are seeking to needlessly divide the body of Christ based on *their* status as "THE disciples" or "the twelve." You see it in their words, "we tried to stop him, because he was not following US." They don't say, "Not following YOU, Jesus." They say, "Us." So who is the coming Kingdom of God really about: Us, or Jesus?

And so Jesus corrects them. "The Kingdom is about ME, and if this man can drive out the demons (Which the disciples had just failed to do in the last chapter) his faith must be sincere. And it must not be in himself, but in me." Be at peace with him.

How might we learn from this? I think this is an invitation to rejoice, not grumble, in all those who follow Christ. Even if the expressions of that, in issues of adiaphora (what's not commanded or forbidden in the Bible), might look different than "Us."

This is not an invitation to water-down the theology, this is not an invitation to ignore the differences, this is an invitation to remind ourselves that the Mission of Christ is to seek and save the lost, to cast out the darkness of the world, and may we rejoice in His Work to do that in our midst, and around the world. “Be at peace with one another.”

Jesus builds on this teaching in the next book on the shelf, if I may. He says, “For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.” He turns it on them. How do others see you, the twelve? As competition – like how they viewed the man casting out demons? What if they didn’t see you as competition but as fellow followers of, not their own way, but of Christ? If so, and should they choose to bless you in even the most mundane ways, not miraculous, but mundane of ways, - what is Jesus’ response should they do that? to commend them! They will not lose their reward if they give YOU even a cup of water.

Can we see our fellow believers as, not competition, but fellow followers of Jesus? And I get it, the Church has all these denominations and those are conversations worth having, about our differences, and that will impact how we practice, but we can also do that in love and not as enemies. And to offer them support in great or little ways... and I wonder if the “little ways” are emphasized, a cup of cold water, because the Lord knows in big ways (grand joint services, and the like) well, that is going to be difficult. But if we could support each other in the little ways, ways consistent with our conscience and teaching... what a blessing that would be? “Be at peace with one another.”

The array of books on the shelf, between our bookends of conflict and peace, continue. We pass from the man casting out demons, to the cup of cold water, to a stern warning about those who lead his little one’s astray. We saw the reward for those who promote peace, Jesus doubles down

with a warning for those who sow discord and lead his children away from him. “It would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.”

And the Collar feels a little tighter around the neck – that’s for sure. How’s that for symbolism?

You’ve been on the ocean, I presume, seen the cold dark waters. This is how seriously the Lord takes this. For the school we have to take abuse recognition training. Statistics show 90% of abusers never see judicial process. A shame for certain. But a misleading statistic in a way... because as our Lord promises today, no, no – 100% of abusers will go before the Judge. And that’s a good thing. But lets get the mirrors out too, when we’ve disparaged our children, or been a lousy influence... Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy indeed.

But we find no respite, immediately in the text. He continues, the next book on the bookshelf, he continues speaking of the dire consequences of sin: “which is worse?” He effectively asks: “repentance in its most graphic sense – chopping off that which causes us to sin - or to be under the judgment of God and outside his kingdom?” God’s judgment is far worse, we know this intellectually, but then why would we still rather hold that grudge and hatred against your neighbor than be at peace with one another?

Obviously, we are not running around, nor were the disciples, with missing limbs and eyes. Indeed, as we know, the cause of sin is our heart – and it’s a bit tricky to cut that out and still keep living. And so to deal with the symptoms of sin, yes, we would be eyeless and limbless and more, in a short amount of time. But Jesus again is talking about the consequences, not so much the root cause – as he taught us a few weeks ago. And so, as the *consequences* go – which is worse – worms and fire – or repentance?

Here we may leave our bookshelf, and go to another portion of the library of the scriptures and spend a bit of time talking of this scary place called hell. We are reminded that it's intended purpose is for the devil and his demons, the enemies of God. We are reminded that it is a place of justice, which is inherently good. "Why so long – an eternity!?" We ask. There are several possibilities, most convincing for me is the realization that who says the enemies of God stop rebelling once they are there? And still we balk, "but he's God – yes he's just, but can't he do something about it?" About his nature? About his justice? They are GOOD, we are the one's who aren't. Or should he do something to save people from it? Like, you know, coming to suffer the cup of wrath and hell himself that his justice might be perfect and we be saved from it? Like come and weep over the lost, not chew popcorn as they perish? Like send out the Gospel to every corner of the world? Like continue to work in the children and the dying? Like to remind us today of what is at stake so perhaps we can stop grumbling over things that don't matter in eternity?

And lest we think we deserve less than this judgment because of how "pretty good" we are, or our smarts, or anything we have earned, we can go back to our bookshelf, our text, and see that Jesus reminds us that EVERYONE will be salted with fire. Which doesn't sound particularly comfortable does it? What is the function of this salt – seasoning, preservative? Perhaps both?

And so this book on the shelf, on salt and fire, speaks of being broken people in a broken world. How the Lord has not promised us lives of luxury but tribulation. How he partakes of the cross, so why should we expect not to have crosses to bear? This book speaks of Jesus as a man of sorrows, so that he can be with us in our sorrows and to what end? To shape us, to form us, to look past the distractions of the world and to the world to come and His Kingdom, to have us look to him.

The one who was baptized by fire on the cross, who drank the cup of wrath, who was sacrificed to pay the debt of division tallied up by his foolish disciples, then and now. That we might be One, One in Him, that he might see us to a place where His, again, One, Church, his bride, will be together, unified, and rejoicing.

Because remember these are not separate random sayings, they all inform the beginning and ending bookend of this section of Mark - Be at peace.

May we strive for that peace, not without clarity, not with compromising God's truth, but may we strive for that peace. With cups of cold water, with salt, with warnings and encouragements, Law and Gospel, and may the God of wisdom and peace grant us the skill to use those at the right times and places.

And when we fall short, may we find refuge in the One who will, One day, bring peace to his people, when he brings us to life eternal. He has worked to do this. He has overcome the darkness of the world, he has overcome the evil one, he has overcome death, and is stronger than our stubborn hearts. Which means that our comfort lies, not in our ability to be peacemakers in this world of strife, but it lies in his ability to reconcile, and we know he can because he has already reconciled us to the Father through his work. He has made us to be at peace with God, by his Cross and empty tomb. God is not mad at you, he is not out to get you. You are his child.

When we fall short, there is our rest, there is our comfort, there is our peace.

And may that peace which surpasses all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.