

Psalm 124:6-7 Blessed be the LORD! [The Lord] has not given us over to be a prey for their teeth. We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowler; the snare is broken, and we have escaped. Our help is in the Name of the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth.

Introduction

In an episode of *Grey's Anatomy*, a 20-year-old man comes to the ER because he's attempted to cut off his right hand due to "sin". Per the directives of Jesus, he explains to the doctor, this besetting sin (revolving around self-pleasure) involved his hand, and since it was a stumbling block, he tried to cut it off. A literalist, this young man took Jesus's words as they were: the word of God as command to be obeyed. The doctor assisting him, April, tries to convince him not to take the text that literally. The young man replies in such a way to indicate that the word of God is true or it isn't and then if it isn't true, then he's wasted his entire life following Jesus and believing in him and God. Then I scream into my pillow: *context is king!*

Just like doctors who cannot watch doctor shows, I cannot handle watching media portray religion in general and Christianity in specific. While I think the episode did a decent job presenting space to the viewers to ask more profound questions about faith and belief, sacred text and sacred dogma, it still rendered the image of Christianity and Christians with it in simplistic and literal terms, leaving behind the profoundly rich potential for nuance and creativity.

The binary that something is true (read: factual) or it isn't (read: hard lie), isn't a binary that exists. Something can be true and not factual or real; something can be factual and built of lies. There's variation between two polarized things; there is a shade of gray that is so dark that it looks like it's the shade black, but it's not. It's very very very very very very dark gray. And so, we must be willing, especially as those encountered with God in the event of faith, to investigate doctrines and dogmas and ask many, many questions and bend toward creativity. We are humans, given rich inquisitive and creative minds; not robots prewired and coded to obey without thought and question.

So, in that spirit, we must ask: what does Jesus mean when he commands the disciples to cut off the appendage that is causing spiritual stumbling? Let's look.

Mark 9:38-50

And whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, it is better for them if a donkey's millstone lies around upon their neck and be thrown into the sea. And if your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is good for you to enter life without a hand than arrive in the unquenchable fire of Gehenna having two hands. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is good for you to enter life maimed than to be thrown into Gehenna having two feet. And if your eye

causes you to stumble, pluck it out; it is good for you to enter the kingdom of God one-eyed than be cast into Gehenna having two eyes. Mark 9: 42-48¹

Mark continues the conversation between Jesus and his disciples picking up with John ratting out a stranger for doing an exorcism in the name of Christ and telling Jesus they tried to stop him but failed.² The cliquishness³ and exclusivity⁴ of the disciples are exposed in this moment of “impulsive hostility” toward an outsider who was unknown to them.⁵ Jesus responds quickly to disarm and defang such cliquishness and excluding behavior by correlating the powerful deed done in Jesus’s name with a future inability to speak ill of Jesus. According to Mark’s Jesus, this outsider is an insider and on the right side by virtue of their activity done in the name of Christ.⁶ *So, why get in their way? Why intentionally try to cause them to stumble in their activity?*

Jesus then mentions that if anyone were to give you even the most simple and basic thing (a cup of water, which, in that context, was a common and expected thing to do⁷), specifically because you bear the name of Christ, then there is reward that won’t be lost. With the *anyone*, Jesus does what the disciples can’t do: extend the boundaries of the group from a circle of twelve to a potentially ever-expanding quantity of people. Where the disciples want to limit the group to exclusive membership that looks a particular way (*this person wasn’t following US*), Jesus, like Jesus does, tears down the wall. Even that small act of a fellow journeyer⁸ to one of

¹ Translation mine unless otherwise noted

² See fn4

³ RT France *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* NIGTC Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002. 378, “The cliquishness which too easily affects a defined group of people with a sense of mission is among the ‘worldly’ values which must be challenged in the name of the kingdom of God.”

⁴ France *Mark 377* “What John is looking for is not so much personal allegiance and obedience to Jesus, but membership in the ‘authorised’ circle of his followers. We should perhaps understand ἡμεῖς here as specifically the Twelve, regarded as having an exclusive link with and commission from Jesus, so that other people’s association with him must be through their mediation. Even if such a possessive doctrine is not explicit, it fits John’s restrictive action and explains the terms of Jesus response.”

⁵ RT France *Mark 376* “The impulsive hostility to an outsider revealed in this incident (cf. Lk. 9:54) perhaps gives some basis for the otherwise puzzling epithet Βοανηργές (see on 3:17). If the imperfect tense of ἐκωλύομεν is correct...it probably indicates an unsuccessful attempt rather than the repeated prohibition of a persistent offender’.”

⁶ France *Mark 377* “First, the fact that the man is able to work a miracle in Jesus’ name shows that he cannot be an enemy...There is no suggestion that the man is personally known to Jesus; rather, he has associated himself with him by using his name, and his choice of that authority, together with the fact of his success, marks him as being on the right side. Such a person cannot in consistency go on to speak as his enemy, and so there is no justification for Jesus’ disciples to oppose him.”

⁷ France *Mark 378* “This phrase thus brings the series of ‘name’ formulae to a climax where the actual name is spelled out: ὅτι Χριστοῦ ἐστε. It is *that* name which gives this kind act its specific significance and justifies the reward. This is not mere benevolence, but the demonstration that a person is ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν by means of practical help given specifically to those who belong to Jesus.”

⁸ France *Mark 378-9* “The three sayings collected in vv. 39-41 thus illustrate in different ways the open boundaries of the kingdom of God, where both committed disciple and sympathetic fellow traveler find their place. The unknown exorcist represents this outer circle, and is to be welcomed as such. There are indeed opponents and ‘outsiders’, as we see repeatedly in the rest of the gospel, but disciples are called on to be cautious in drawing lines of demarcation. They are to be a church, not a sect.”

those of Christ is seen and acknowledged; to see Christ in another person and act on it for their livelihood (even if basic) is to be on the right side.⁹ The disciples see themselves as part of a sect, but Jesus has called them to be a church.¹⁰

He then moves straight into the declaration that it would be better to have a millstone put around one's neck and thrown into the sea than to cause "one of these little ones" to stumble. As if in juxtaposition to the simple and common act of giving water to even one such as these, Jesus makes another very similar statement, but this time in the negative. To give water to one of these who bear the name of Christ is worthy of reward; but to make one stumble is worse than being thrown into the sea with a millstone around one's neck. A quick death is better than the actual punishment deserved for causing one of those who believe in Jesus to stumble; the actual punishment, Jesus mentions, is eternal torment (vv. 43, 45, 47).¹¹ Jesus continues to speak of hands, feet, and eyes that cause you to stumble. It's better, he says (rhetorically, according to the structure of the Greek text), to cut them off or pluck them out than to keep all of your appendages and organs and be thrown into the eternal torment of the unquenchable fire of Gehenna.

Conclusion

There's nothing in this passage about sex or personalized sin habits; it's about solidarity.

All of this is part of a larger context--beginning last week—and makes sense in conjunction with the wider context of the discussion between Jesus and his disciples. An indicator is the "little ones" (μικροί), which correlates these statements back to the conversation about "who is the greatest..." Jesus is building from that discussion by calling all followers "little ones". And Jesus cares a lot about the μικροί who are the children of God. *Whoever receives one such as this child/little one in my name... Anyone who does anything life-giving to another child of God for the name of Christ, is one with God. In this way, the first is last, and servant of all. In this way, to be greatest is to be smallest, humbly following Christ and walking with other fellow journeyers on the way; not tripping up others or tripping up yourselves—no matter how long we've been walking, we are all able to be tripped up and to trip up.*

⁹ France *Mark* 378 "The language of reward, which is so prominent in Matthew, appears explicitly only here in Mark (though see 10:28-30 for the idea). It is a paradoxical term to use in connection with a gift of water, which is so basic a feature of Eastern hospitality as to require no reward. But even so small an act betokens a person's response to Jesus in the person of his disciples (cf. Mt. 25:31-46), and as such will not be unnoticed."

¹⁰ France *Mark* 379

¹¹ France *Mark* 380 "To be the cause of another's spiritual shipwreck is so serious an offence that a quick drowning would be preferable to the fate it deserves; the μύλος ὀνικός the stone from a mill ground by donkey power, far heavier than that of a mill, ensures an immediate death. The stone is rather grotesquely pictured as 'placed round' (περίκειται) the neck like a collar, rather than hung from it (Mt. 18:6, κρεμασθῆ). καλόν ἐστιν μάλλον indicates a comparison: the drowning is not itself the appropriate fate of such a person...but rather serves as a foil to set off the greater severity of the actual punishment merited...What that punishment is will be indicated in the language of γέννα and πῦρ ἄσβεστων which dominates the following verses."

In order to walk this way, Jesus is exhorting the disciples not only to think bigger about what parameters form the group, they must also re-evaluate what it means to follow Jesus as a disciple.¹² It necessitates continual self-examination and openness,¹³ taking seriously life-giving and not death-dealing. Thus, those who follow Christ must not be stumbling blocks to other people or stumbling blocks to ourselves. It's such a serious thing that Jesus attaches hellfire and quick death to it. Intentionally getting in the way and being a stumbling block to oneself¹⁴ and others is a capital offense for Jesus.¹⁵ We are to be in solidarity with other children of God, which and in light of God so loving the entire cosmos, puts us in solidarity with *all* other people, especially those who are suffering from oppression and marginalization and with whom Jesus stood in solidarity.

The Rev. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz brilliantly defines Christian solidarity,

The preferential option at the heart of solidarity is based on the fact that the point of view of the oppressed, 'pierced by suffering and attracted by hope, allows them, in their struggles, to conceive another reality...'. The preferential option for the poor and the oppressed makes it possible for the oppressors to overcome alienation, because to be oppressive limits love, and love cannot exist in the midst of alienation. Oppression and poverty must be overcome because they are a 'slap in the face of God's sovereignty'. The alienation they cause is a denial of God. Guitierrez refers to the profoundly biblical insight of a Bolivian campesino: 'an atheist is someone who fails to practice justice toward the poor.'¹⁶

Jan made brilliant reference last week to us being the hands and feet of Christ in the world, loving others actively in deed and word. And I can't help but see her imagery here in this text. If we are to be the hands and feet and eyes of Christ in the world, shouldn't we take all pains to ruthlessly examine ourselves and our bodily presence in the world and how we are or are not in

¹² France *Mark* 380 "The whole little complex of sayings, like the preceding pericopes, focuses on the demands of discipleship, both negatively and positively."

¹³ France *Mark* 383, "Christians who disparage 'hell-fire preaching' must face the awkward fact that Mark's Jesus (and still more Matthew's and Luke's) envisaged an ultimate separation between life and γέννα which demanded the most drastic renunciation in order to avoid the unquenchable fire, and that he did not regard even his disciples as immune from the need to examine themselves and take appropriate action."

¹⁴ France *Mark* 382-3 "The extended warning of w. 43-48 picks up the theme of 'tripping' from v. 42, but the victim is not now someone else (a 'little one') but oneself, 'tripped' by one's own hand, foot, or eye. Danger comes to the disciple not only from outside but from within. The metaphor is not explained; it is for the reader individually (the savings are expressed in the singular throughout, except for the αὐτῶν derived from the LXX in v. 48) to determine what aspect of one's own behaviour, tastes, or interests is a potential cause of spiritual downfall, and to take action accordingly."

¹⁵ France *Mark* 381, "Disciples of any age are potentially vulnerable to such 'tripping'. After the disciples' abortive discussion of τίς μείζων (v. 34) it is very appropriate that μικροί be used to denote disciples in general. And it is the μικροί who matter so much to Jesus that to trip even one of them up is more than a capital offence."

¹⁶ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996. 91

solidarity with others? For it is better to suffer the pain of awareness and confession, then to go about life oblivious to how I'm hurting others and delighting in my own comfort.

To be the church in Christ's name, we must extend our definition of beloved children of God to embrace all those who bear the mark of divine love. For we are called to love as we have been loved.