

## Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, \*  
O LORD, my strength and my redeemer.”

Today’s gospel passage seems to jump all over the place. To hold it together, we need to remember where we left off last week, with the verses that immediately precede today’s passage. Jesus had taken a little child into his arms and told the disciples that “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”

Jesus still has that child in his arms, and John – who misses the whole point about *welcoming* the least and overlooked, the disenfranchised, in your midst – then says, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” It’s obvious that John and the other disciples had missed out on the story of Eldad and Medad – or at least they had forgotten it. Just because Eldad and Medad had not joined all the others in the “tent of meeting” – some thought they should be stopped from prophesying. But the Spirit of God had come upon them anyway, and speak they did. And so likewise in the gospel, the spirit had led a man, who was outside the group of the disciples, to speak God’s word as he knew it, to free someone from an evil spirit.

Jesus must have been beside himself. Here he is, *demonstrating* what he has been telling them about the inclusivity of the love of God, and the disciples are busy with drawing lines to determine who is in and who is out.

So Jesus, still holding the toddler, says to them, “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me... you are in big trouble.” Don’t try to block someone who is trying to do good! And then he gets more descriptive – talking about all the things that are REALLY the stumbling blocks – and they are all parts of *US* – not things or persons outside us. If *YOUR* hand, or *YOUR* foot, or *YOUR* eye are the problem – get rid of them. Jesus is not advocating for amputations. If your hand – if what you are doing, if your foot – if what motivates you, if your eye – if how you look at the world – if those things are keeping you from the way of God, then get rid of them, then *CHANGE* them. Change what you do, change where you go or why you move, change how you look at others and the world. Because if you don’t, you’ll end up in Gehenna.

I know, our translation says “hell” – but Gehenna is the word. It’s the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew words “Valley of Hinnom.” So what, you say? In some of the references to the Valley of Hinnom in the Hebrew Scriptures, you’ll find the Ahaz, King of Judah, used that valley to sacrifice some of his sons to the god Molech. God was not pleased. Later that valley – outside the city of Jerusalem – became the dumping ground for the bodies of dead soldiers, and for the garbage and trash of the city. They attempted to burn the bodies and garbage – and the fire seemed never-ending. The maggots never went away, because there was always new dead flesh to consume. That was *Gehenna*.

I don’t think Jesus was trying to scare us into good behavior by depicting a hell we might end up at the end of our earthly lives. No, I think what Jesus is really saying here is that if our actions, if our life paths, if our world-view are leading us to think that it is okay to exclude, or to treat others with disdain, or use violence against others – then we need to change that – we need to get rid of those ways – or we will end up in Gehenna. We will end up with a world that is full of dead bodies from our wars and murder with their worms - and a pile of trash and garbage from our failure to care for the rest of creation that will burn far longer than we will be here. Jesus is telling us that there are consequences to the things we do with our hands, the places we walk with our feet, the ways we look at the world and others and ourselves. And those consequences are here, not in some far-off hell.

It's not hard to apply all of this to our present day. We saw, in the goings-on in the Senate Hearings this week and all of the surrounding drama, the wounds of war. We saw the carnage that results when what we do, how we look at others, where we let our passions for power and domination take us – are motivated by anything other than love. But we also saw the power of words – the words of women too long silent, and words between friends and even political enemies aimed at finding a way to peace. We can repent – that is, we can change our way of looking at one another, at ourselves, at our world – and thus change our lives and the lives of those around us.

We are left with fire and salt – symbols of purification, and energy, and preservation. They are also apt symbols of the Spirit of God. And so we are left with this message from Jesus: Have salt in yourselves – Have the Holy Spirit in yourselves, live from *that* Spirit – and be at peace with one another.

May it be so.

[Numbers 11:4-6,10-16,24-29](#)

[Psalm 19:7-14](#)

[James 5:13-20](#)

[Mark 9:38-50](#)