

September 27, 2009
Lectionary 26b
Mark 9:38-50
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

FOR THE HELL OF IT

It would be a compliment to hear you say these things about today's sermon: *Pastor Mueller gave us a lot of hell today. It was just garbage.*

Hell and garbage. Not the usual topics for sermons here, at least. But there's no way to understand today's gospel without going there. After all, Jesus says that it is better to cut off your hand or foot, pluck out your eye, or mutilate yourself than to end up in hell. Where are the biblical literalists when these verses come up? Some of us may like to cut out these "lopping off limbs" sayings of Jesus. But they give us an opportunity to go deeper into the text to see what it's getting at.

To start with, it follows last week's gospel where the disciples are hung up on who is the greatest. They don't get the whole thing about the cross and suffering. Jesus tells them they should be welcoming children, welcoming nobodies. And now they're all concerned about someone outside their circle who is casting out demons. Jesus tells them to chill. To be glad for all acts of compassion and service, like giving a cup of water to someone in need of one.

But then Jesus gets to the tough part. There will be hell to pay if you cause little ones to stumble. Little ones. The nobodies: children, outsiders, the poor, the oppressed. Though many religious people want to figure out whether non-believers will be sent to hell, Jesus says none of that kind of talk. His warnings are for his inner circle, the lead followers. There will be hell to pay when the strong abuse the weak.

Maybe we don't talk enough about hell. If we did, we'd come to know that Jesus' words in this passage are not about the place that evil people go after death. There are several words for hell in the Bible. This isn't the Hebrew *Sheol*, the underworld place of the dead. The hell in this passage refers to a literal place outside Jerusalem. A garbage dump, if you will. *Gehenna* is the Aramaic name for it. It was originally a place of pagan child sacrifice. But by Jesus' day it was the town dump filled with rubbish, bones, decaying carcasses. The fires burned continuously which is probably why Christians later conceived of hell as a place of fire and brimstone.

Jesus is using some pretty strong language to make a point for those who are serious about following him. It would be better to be on a hell-heap of garbage than to cause a little one to stumble.

Jump ahead to today. We have not only dishonored one another, we have often abused the earth and made of it a hell-hole. It reminds me of the 2008 movie *Wall-E* in which human beings have had to evacuate the earth because tons of trash and rubbish made it uninhabitable. Wall-e is a trash compactor who sorts through discarded garbage to find light bulbs, Zippo lighters, nuts and bolts, and Rubik's cubes.

I read that New York City produces 38,000 tons of waste per day, most of it ending up in landfills. Maybe these city dumps are our *Gehenna*, places of hell in our world today.

One self-described "eco-geek" from Seattle was curious where her trash ended up. She partnered with researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to track 12 items from her garbage and recycling bins. They tagged a can of beans, a compact fluorescent light bulb and other stuff with a small electronic tracking device. They will find out where each of them ends up and how long it takes. One purpose of projects like these is to give people a concrete sense of their impact on the environment in a way that might lead them to change their habits. If you find that a plastic bottle ends up down the road in a dump, you may want to get tap water or use some other container, one lab director said.

The theme for Holy Trinity's generosity campaign this fall is "Living Simply." For the next seven weeks we will reflect on ways to simplify our lifestyles. We will consider our bodies, the earth, the environment. We will make connections between our call to service, stewardship and generosity. From today's gospel about a hellish garbage dump, we stand back and reflect on the over-abundance of stuff in our lives. And the ways we have used what we wanted and discarded and cast off the rest, with no concern for generations to come. The ways we have made a hell out of the good earth created by God.

But let's be honest--life itself can be hellish. Many people live in hopeless states of poverty or hunger, abuse or sadness. Then there are the cast offs: homeless people, refugees, those we deem socially unacceptable. One woman at a mental institution once told a church member: "I feel like I have been dumped here for good." When we fail to honor the dignity of a person and treat them like garbage—left to decay or rot—it might as well be the garbage dump in our gospel today, Gehenna, hell.

The version of the creed that many of us grew up with says that Jesus descended into hell. It means to suggest that after his death Jesus went to the place of the dead, to break the power of death. But throughout his life Jesus entered the places we would rather avoid. The hellish places of suffering, loss and pain. The godless places devoid of beauty. Jesus continues to stand with those on the margins, on the outskirts of town. Those abandoned or dumped in homes or other institutions.

One writer urges the church to be the kind of place that keeps entering hell to salvage lives and to remind them that they are not destined for the ash heap of the world, but precious to God. We are called to take in the refuse of the world and to make something beautiful out of that which the world has discarded. (William Willimon).

Too much talk about hell fixates on whether it is literal or on who will be there in the afterlife. There is plenty of hell to deal with in this life. Plenty of garbage. Plenty of helplessness. Plenty of people discarded and cast off from all that God intends for our world.

Yet amid all the garbage and all the hell in this sermon and in the world, Christ comes to us this day. Embracing us and all who are cast off because of prejudice and power. Christ comes in the word and at the table that we might be at peace with one another. Not living in fear. Not lopping off limbs. But treasuring each day. Honoring the world. Loving mother earth and one another. Making what is ugly, beautiful.

That is what we pray for this day. That is what we celebrate in this liturgy. That is what God offers to us. Heaven. A taste of heaven.