

A SERMON PREACHED AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH,
BETHANY BEACH, DE, ON SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2018

A little girl was talking to her teacher about whales and how she had heard in Sunday School that a whale had swallowed Jonah.

The teacher said it was physically impossible for a whale to swallow a human because even though it was a very large mammal its throat was very small.

The little girl remained steadfast in her position and reiterated that indeed, a whale had swallowed Jonah.

Irritated, the teacher again stated that a whale could not swallow a human; it was physically impossible.

The little girl said, "I'm not sure how it happened, but when I get to heaven I will ask Jonah."

The teacher replied smugly, "What if Jonah went to hell?"

The little girl replied, "Then you ask him."

Today we have a gospel with several admonitions and the punishment for not paying attention to the law. They are extreme and give me a clue where the Roman Catholic nuns of my childhood got their ideas! They begin when John (who rarely speaks in the gospels) complains to Jesus that the disciples encountered someone casting out demons in Jesus' name and they tried to stop him because he was not a follower, as they were. Jesus tells them not to worry about such mundane things since anyone who speaks in his name or does the kind of work Jesus and his disciples are going about in the business of bringing forth God's kingdom are correctly visioned. "For the one against us is not for us," Jesus says.

I've had a personal experience of this from my early days in ministry. I lived in a large county with 62 towns in a small unincorporated hamlet called Hartsdale. I had been called to a congregation that had not had a minister for several years and was living hand to mouth with the benefit of supply clergy. As I worked on cleaning up the records to find out who was who, I encountered folks from a neighboring town whom I discovered were not attending any church, but who had once all been active in one nearby church. I invited a few of them to our Sunday service, and a group of them starting coming regularly. This prompted an irate phone call from the minister of the church they had once attended, asking "what do you think you are doing?" "What do you mean?" I asked. "Those folks belong to me," he said. "They live in this town, they should only be going to church in this town." I thanked him for his comments; but because his former members continued to attend church at our chapel, I soon got a call (not surprisingly) from the bishop. Once I

explained what was going on he iterated, "after all, it is not as though there is a shortage of people to minister to," and with some good sense prevailing, it all ended then and there. (I did learn by experience to call neighboring clergy in the future if any of their former congregants started showing up in church on a regular basis. Foretold is forewarned...You'd be surprised how some clergy respond to the news, everything to "good, glad to be rid of them" to things I can't repeat in public. In my opinion folks eventually end up where they'll be most happy, and that just might even include nowhere at all.)

So, back to the outsider doing works in Jesus' name. Amy Oden, Prof. of Church History at St. Paul School of Theology, OK, says "we get the clear message that the disciples' finger-pointing will not get far with Jesus. While they are eager to bring judgment on this outsider who is acting in Jesus' name, Jesus himself wants the disciples to pay attention instead to their own behavior.

In fact, Jesus immediately turns the tables on the disciples, warning them that *they* are the ones in danger of doing harm. It's as though Jesus says, 'The problem is not the folks outside our group. Don't worry about others -- they are not the problem. Rather, look to yourselves. How are you getting in the way of the gospel? How are you a stumbling block.'"ⁱⁱⁱ

"Is it possible that finger-pointing and scrupulosity about others can distract us so that we do harm and cause others to stumble? Sometimes, even our best intentions to reprove others can have unintended consequences for innocent bystanders. Indeed, great damage is done to the gospel when Christians are preoccupied with infighting and self-righteous proclamations about others. Jesus returns the focus back to our own behaviors, the ways we speak and live good news, and the ways we place obstacles in the way of that good news."ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Of course he desires good news and few or no stumbling blocks in his effort to spread God's peace. We too often get in the way of the gospel by our actions and our inactions. Think of the last time you got in the way of someone's good news. It's hard to think like that, but we do. I've got a relative that is good at it. He can spoil any day, any occasion by merely showing up. He then makes the entire occasion about him by relating how he had such a hard time getting to the party; how his current state of unemployment preventing him from bringing a gift; might he sing or play a song as a gift (neither of which he should ever do)? Then *he* has to cut the cake (do you have baggies so we can take some of this home?); he has to get everyone up for one last dance, with him; he then whisperingly begins to beg for a ride home, and acts disappointed and rejected if you cannot help. He is a stumbling block to the nth, and folks let him act that way, especially if he's been drinking, which he almost always has. Attendees turn to the pastor in the family, who is supposed to show compassion (besides he's a relative, anyway). WWJD? The best response I believe would be to focus on self, don't take on the victim's blame (he'll find a way home); be firm; uphold him in prayer; know when the issues are larger than you can handle; make sure what you are about furthers God's kingdom. And if you're going to help,

seek an answer that best suits everyone while not enabling the one looking for a handout. It's all a tall order, but it can be managed.

Yet it seems as though however clear Jesus tries to make things for the disciples so that they might understand how to act, how to behave, they don't understand precisely what is expected to be a disciple. In the next part of the gospel Jesus goes into a series of admonitions, i.e., warnings, about what happens to those who get in the way of the good news of the gospel. They include plucking out an eye, cutting off a foot, and cutting off a hand, in what is some of the most gruesome hyperbole of the entire bible. But Jesus was trying to get folks' attention, and I can guarantee they sat up and turned up their hearing aids for this trio of reproofs. Most preachers skip over this part of the gospel when preaching on *Mark* and one can see why. It's hard to imagine Jesus preaching in this manner or that this is God's way of doling out punishments. I won't be spending a lot of time here either, but suffice it to say that Jesus has harsh things in mind for those who do not pay attention to what he is saying. If he were looking to establish his authority his words were certainly speaking for him.

When one approaches this portion of the gospel, it seems like a series of unrelated sayings rather than a united text. You have the opening portion that criticizes sectarianism, the next portion that looks at stumbling blocks, and the third portion that speaks to punishment for getting things wrong. The gospel passage ends up with a rather obscure view or collection of thoughts about salt. How that relates to the rest of the text is a mystery. Yet interestingly enough it is one of the most quoted sections of *Mark*, so the biblical commentators have found some value in spending some time here. "Everyone will be salted with fire," the text says. "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other." The verse, "'(For) everyone will be salted by fire' does not stand alone even though it is written in the biblical text as if it should. It is a teaching about being at peace or in loving harmony with other Christian disciples in a way that Jesus describes as having saltiness. Salt is a good thing: Salt was an essential item in first-century Palestine. In a hot climate, without refrigeration, salt was the practical means of preserving food.

Just as a little salt can flavor bland food, so the implication is that Christians should 'salt' the society we live and work in by the loving care such 'saltiness' shows to others."^{iv} In other words, preserve your friendships, your relationships, and your time with one another. It will be valuable in the long run and it is what Christ desires to help bring about the kingdom by producing godly character, enabling a person to act as a preservative in society.^v Salt is also a metaphor for knowledge and the work of the Holy Spirit, so the possibilities of what it means based on how it is used in text are many.

As a modern-day example, consider this true tale. All members of *Mensa* have I.Q.s of at least 140. At one *Mensa* convention, several members at a local cafe noticed the shaker

with an S on top, for salt, contained pepper and their pepper shaker, with a P on top, was full of salt. How could they swap the contents of the bottles without spilling anything and using only the implements at hand? Clearly, here was the marvelous Mensa mystery!

They presented ideas, debated them, and finally came up with what they felt was a brilliant solution involving a napkin, a straw, and an empty saucer.

They called the waitress over to dazzle her with their solution.

"Ma'am," they said, "we couldn't help but notice that the pepper shaker contains salt and the salt shaker contains..."

"Oh, sorry!" interrupted the waitress. "Here," and she unscrewed the caps of both bottles and switched them.^{vi}

So much for a conspiracy of dunces, no?

1. The intent of the gospel section we've been considering today is ultimately a reminder about peace; you might say the entire book of *Mark* is about peace. How would you describe peace to another person. How about this, from the website *Christianity in view*? "Peace with God and the Peace of God refer to a mental attitude of tranquility based on a relationship with God. Peace is a word which describes the result of a person's correct response to God's grace."^{vii}
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3. Wow. I'd never thought of peace as a correct response to God's grace. Think about that and all that it infers for a moment. Essentially it means that the amount of peace we will encounter in life is dependent on how open we are to the Word and actions of God. The best we can do is hope that we hear and see that Word everywhere and often. It all begins with the realization that God shows no partiality, and neither should we. And "Peace begins with a smile,"^{viii} said Mother Teresa. Of that we've got plenty to share, so let it begin with us. Amen.

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ⁱ <http://jokes4all.net/hell-jokes?p=2>

ⁱⁱ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1357

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} <https://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/7922/what-does-being-salted-with-fire-mean-in-mark-949>

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} <http://jokes.humourbox.info/2007/08/salt-pepper.html>

^{vii} <http://christianityinview.com/biblestudies/peace.html>

^{viii} https://search.aol.com/aol/image;_ylt=AwrJ6yoO065bekMArNBpCWVH;_ylu=X3oDMTByMDgyYjiBGNvbG8DYmYxBHBvcwMyBHZ0aWQDBHNlYwNzYw--?q=peace+quotes&v_t=webmail-searchbox