

Hyperbole?

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

September 27, 2009

Mark 9:38-50

The disciples had so much to learn, and so much to un-learn, too! Jesus, who was not a lousy teacher, used every opportunity to instruct them.

John said to [Jesus], “Teacher, we saw someone throwing out demons in your name, and we tried to make him stop, because he wasn’t following us.” But Jesus said, “Don’t stop him! No one is going to do something wonderful in my name and then right away be able to speak against me. Whoever is not against us is on our side. I tell you the truth, whoever gives you a cup of water because you are the Messiah’s will not go unrewarded. Yet whoever trips up one of these little ones who have faith in me, it would be better for that person to put on a millstone necklace and to be thrown into the sea.

“So if your hand should trip you up, cut it off! It’s better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go off to Gehenna, to the fire that can’t be put out. And if your foot should trip you up, cut it off! It’s better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into Gehenna. And if your eye should trip you up, tear it out! It’s better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into Gehenna, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not put out.

“You see, everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is a good thing. But if salt should become un-salty, what would you season it with? Have salt among yourselves, and live in peace with one another.

Children’s Story

Sammy the Squirrel almost fell into a deep, dark hole. He didn’t know it was there. He was running right along the edge of it when he looked down. He nearly jumped out of his skin!

Sammy had never seen a hole so deep and so dark. He dropped a stick into the hole, and it disappeared from sight. Sammy never heard the stick hit bottom.

This was a dangerous hole. Everyone in the Great Forest needed to know about it. It was Sammy’s job to tell them.

So he told Priscilla the Possum. He told Gordon the Gecko. And he told Dolly the Deer. He told them all the same thing.

“It’s horrible!” he said. “Sharp teeth jut out from the sides of the hole to bite you when you fall in. And flames shoot up to burn off all your hair and to melt your skin. And at the bottom, there’s a pool of lava to dissolve what’s left of you. It’s horrible!”

Sammy told everyone he could about the deep, dark hole. And they all told others. Soon everyone in the Great Forest knew about the hole and knew to stay away from it. Sammy had done his job. Everyone was safe.

Now, of course, there were no sharp teeth on the sides of the hole. And there were no skin-melting flames. And there was no body-dissolving pool of lava at the bottom of the hole either.

Sammy knew that. Everyone else knew it, too. But they also knew how a good story worked. And they all knew what the teeth and the flames and the lava meant. They meant, “Watch out! There’s a dangerous hole!”

Sermon

We live in the so-called “information age.” More and more information is being generated, accumulated, and stored. Some of that information is scientific. Some of it is historical. Some of it is personal. I was at the doctor’s on Friday. With a few taps on a computer screen, she called up all sorts of information about me.

On Thursday, I was at the gas station. I got a discount of thirty cents on the gallon because the gas pump knows how much money we spent at Kroger last month. And, of course, the main office knows exactly what we spent that money on. Information about you and me and everything is accumulating at an exponentially-increasing rate.

It all started with God. “The hairs on your head are numbered,” Jesus said. Every one of those hairs is accounted for in the Divine Data Center. And this is information with a purpose. The Heidelberg Catechism reminds us of this: “Not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven” (Answer 1). In other words, God uses what he knows about us to look after us. But does God really have such a thorough, actuarial interest in my hair? The record doesn’t have to be so complete, does it, and the control so detailed, for God to look after me effectively? In other words, isn’t Jesus’ statement about every hair being numbered an example of hyperbole?

Hyperbole is a deliberate exaggeration designed to make a point. I think that’s exactly what we have going on when Jesus says the hairs on your head are completely catalogued. And that’s also what we have going on when Jesus says, “Cut your hand off!” or “Tear your eye out!” Those are clear instances of hyperbole. Right?

Here in Mark 9, we have a collection of sayings, and it’s hard to see a single theme among them. First, John reports that he and the others, despite Jesus’ insistence, have tried to be Jesus’ gatekeepers. They almost act like proto-trademark lawyers. They try to issue a “cease and desist” order. They don’t want anyone making use of Jesus’ name, not without the authorization that comes through them. They, after all, are the inner circle. They are the Twelve. Even if the unauthorized person is doing something good, something wonderful, in Jesus’ name, they will have none of it. It’s just not how things are done.

Jesus, it turns out, has a different take. He’s not about to stop someone who has caught the spirit of what he is doing. Jesus has been confronting the powers that ensnare people, confronting those powers and defeating them, all on the way to the main confrontation, the one where he himself will suffer defeat. And now here’s someone who has joined the battle, and on the right side. “Don’t stop him,” Jesus said. “Plenty of people are against us, but this guy isn’t. And if he’s not against us, he’s on our side.” Then Jesus says that it doesn’t take all that much to be on the right side. A cup of water offered to someone who is exhausted from the battle, a cup of water given as an act of support, as an expression of allegiance to the right side, that’s an act that counts in this struggle.

That’s what we have first in this part of Mark 9. Next we have a series of “better this than that” sayings. We’ll come back to those. Finally there are some sayings about salt.

The main point of those sayings seems to be that salt is a good thing. Of course. Salt provides flavor. Salt preserves foods against spoiling. Salt is a necessary compound for life. Yet salt gets a bad rap these days, especially too much salt. A pizzeria in Chicago serves a deep dish, individual pizza that has 5000mg of Sodium. That’s as much salt as twenty-seven small bags of potato chips. That salt is not a good thing. But Jesus intends his disciples to be the “salt of the earth.” Something about their character and their actions, something about their presence even, is to have good effect in the world, to bring flavor, to keep things from spoiling, to make the world and everything human in it a pleasing offering to God. This would be a reflection of Leviticus 2:13. There we learn that grain offerings — grain is a product of human endeavor — grain offerings were to be offered together with an offering of salt. “The salt of the covenant,” it was called, the salt of the promise-based relationship with God. And so the disciples of Jesus are a blessed additive to the world. Something about who they are (who we are!) together is beneficial to the world and non-negotiable.

Now we come back to the “better this than that” sayings, clear instances of hyperbole. A common theme runs through these four sayings, sayings addressed to the disciples and presumably, through them, to the church. The theme is the danger of tripping someone up, including yourself. So the first question is, what does this “tripping up” mean? Sometimes the expression is translated “cause someone to sin” or “cause you to sin.” But that’s too small, too trivial. It’s not about a misdeed, about an “oops, I shouldn’t have done that.”

Notice the contrast. It’s between life and Gehenna, between the Kingdom of God and unending fire. In the larger context, i.e., when these sayings are connected with the other “disconnected” sayings in Mark 9, it’s about what side you’re on. Are you against Jesus or on his side? Have you lined yourself up with and joined with those who are following Jesus toward the kingdom? Or have you turned in another direction? Have you tripped up? Have you fallen out of step? Have you left the march? Or worse, have you caused someone else to turn away from following Jesus?

The point the sayings make is that this is no trivial concern, that what matters more than anything is, are you on Jesus' side? Are you with Jesus? The consequences are real. It's a matter of life and death. It's so important, this question, that rather than cause someone to fall out of step with Jesus or to fall away from Jesus, he says that you should prefer an awful death at the hands of some first century mobsters, who will fit you for a millstone necklace and have you sleeping with the fishes. And rather than fall out of step with Jesus, rather than fall away from Jesus yourself, he says that you should prefer to be a one-armed, one-legged, one-eyed citizen of the kingdom. Because being half a person there is better than being a whole person in flames.

What we think and do about Jesus matters. Jesus was on his way to death, and he didn't turn back. He allowed no one and nothing to trip him up, not even good things, like family and friends or even a deep longing for God. Will we allow anything, even good things, to trip us up? There's nothing wrong with a hand. There's nothing wrong with a foot or with an eye. They are good things, intimate parts of us, necessary for us to fully be who we are in the world. But not even those very good and intimate things can be allowed to get in the way of our following Jesus. To follow Jesus is to make sacrifices, to surrender something that we value, maybe many things — actually, to surrender everything that stands in the way, no matter how close any of those things are to the heart of who we think we are.

Was it hyperbole when Jesus said, "Cut off your hand! Cut off your foot! Tear your eye out!"? Yes, it was. Jesus does not want us to mutilate ourselves. And yet, no, it was not hyperbole. Because what we may need to rid ourselves of is something even more foundational to who we are, something to which we are even more deeply attached, than the parts of our body: whatever it is that trips us up, whatever it is that puts us out of step with Jesus . . . or worse. That's what we have to get rid off.

This is the information age. We are nearly overwhelmed with information. Much of it, maybe even most of it, is trivial. And we have a hard time sorting through it and getting a handle on what's important. Do we have a handle on what gets in the way of our following Jesus? Do we have access to that information? Or are there too many megabytes of data in that folder for us to sort through? Too many files for us even to know where to start?

How about making that an item of prayer? Each one of us can ask God, "God, show me what's in the way. Show me what I need to get rid of. And send your Spirit to me, to help me get up again and to let go and to get in line behind Jesus, behind Jesus and all the saints, and to take the dangerous path, because it is the path of life." We can make that a prayer. And believe me, God knows the things that trip you up. God knows every one of them, knows them better than you do yourself. And that is not hyperbole.