

“A Little Salt Goes a Long Way”

Mark 9:38-50

Andrew Foster Connors

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18th Sunday after Pentecost

A few weeks ago we had a misprint in the bulletin – a scribal error. One of our soloists sang the Lord’s Prayer. In a Freudian slip of the keyboard one of us typed “Give us this day our daily bread and lead us hot into temptation.”

I felt better about the scribal error this week when I saw the error that used to be in your Bible. You can open your Bible to page 920 and I’ll show you what I mean. Right there in the 9th chapter of Mark verses 44 and 46 are missing.¹ They’ve been removed. Before scholars took scissors to most of our Bibles, the paragraph used to read like this:

“If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire (verse 44) where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell (verse 46) where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. And if your eye causes you to stumble tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.”

Two of those “worm never dies” / “fire is never quenched” verses were removed because the earliest manuscripts lacked the repetition. Apparently as the church matured, so did our fascination with hell, worms that never die, and fires that are never quenched, so much so that a scribe inserted the phrase like some twisted chorus in a musical adaption of *Left Behind*.

Somewhere along the way the church became obsessed with the concept of hell as a literal place where people burn in torment forever. Thomas Aquinas said as much – “the fire of hell is not called so metaphorically, not an imaginary fire, but a real corporeal fire.” Dante illustrated that belief in his *Inferno*. And Jonathan Edwards fanned the flames of those fears with his famous “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” sermon. Hell continues to be pushed on billboards and blockbuster films warning us of eternal punishment if we don’t get our choices right. Some of us grew up afraid of going to that literal place. Maybe you still worry about going there.

Personally, I’ve never really worried about hell but I’ve had other people worried for me. A year after moving to Memphis Kate and I heard from a friend that an entire Sunday School class of another Presbyterian Church had been praying for us. That’s nice, I said to our friend. No, no, the friend said. They’re praying for your soul because they think you are in danger of going to hell.

¹ See footnote “d” - <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=mark+9%3A38-50&version=NRSV>

Maybe I was raised too early with the view of a loving God. Or maybe the idea of a God who goes as far as dying for us only to turn around and cast us into eternal torment just never make sense to me. Or maybe it's that I've noticed that religious people obsessed with hell often seem to think that people other than themselves are in danger of going there. But I do understand why people have been worried for me.

Jesus says it's better to cut off your hand, your foot, or your eye than to go to hell. He warns people like me that our actions have consequences and not just for the present. Some pain now is better than worse kinds of pain in the future. Maybe I should be more worried about the eternal torment, that place with the worm never dies and the fire is never quenched. Maybe I should be more concerned about hell.

But hell isn't actually the right word as long as we're looking closely at the text. The word is Gehenna, from the Hebrew Ge Hinnom – the Valley of Hinnom. The Valley of Hinnom is the place where Israel burned its trash.² Like any landfill it was the place where the maggots never seem to die. So much trash was burned there that the fires never seemed go out. But the Valley of Hinnom was worse than that. It was the place where the bodies of dead soldiers were piled up during war. It was the place where the bodies of executed criminals were disposed of. It was also the place, centuries before Jesus, where followers of the Canaanite gods had practiced human sacrifice. “The people of Judah have done evil in my sight,” God says in the 7th chapter of Jeremiah. “. . . in the valley of the son of Hinnom, [they build a temple] to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire—which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind.”

Jesus' hearers weren't thinking about Dante's inferno or Jonathan Edwards' angry God; they were thinking about the landfill of waste, the worse that our kind do to each other, violence, destruction, and death. It's better to do violence to yourself now, Jesus tells his disciples, to purify yourself now, than participate in things that can lead you to Gehenna, where our destruction of each others, our waste of human life never seems to end. It's better to take drastic action on yourself now, than to end up there.

It's that emphasis on yourself that's easily overlooked by some religious people who are used to warning other people about going to hell, used to praying for other people they believe are going to hell, used to excluding others who they suspect are going to hell. Apparently excluding people from the group is a special problem for those of us who follow Jesus. “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us” (9:38). The disciples see threats from outside their community; threats from people outside their control; threats they want to stop.

You can hear it in our presidential debates when we scapegoat Muslims or foreigners or sometimes the spouses of other candidates who are foreign born. You can hear it in our community when people blame what's wrong with our city on racial, ethnic, or religious groups different from the ones they belong to. Some of us

² A variety of sources have informed my understanding of this topic in recent years. One of the more comprehensive and accessible ones is Sharon L. Baker, *Razing Hell: Rethinking Everything You've Been Taught about God's Wrath and Judgment* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 2010, 128-140.

participate in it with our families when we blame our dysfunction on everybody else in the family but ourselves.

It's the other people, the outsiders, that the disciples seem so worried about. But Jesus warns the disciples that good can come from the outside just as easily from the inside. "Whoever is not against us is for us," he says. And bad can come just as easily from the inside, says the one who will be betrayed and denied by his closest followers. And yet the temptation of the church, or maybe any human group, is to worry more about threats from outside its boundaries than from corruption that happens from within.

And maybe Jesus uses such strong language to recommend drastic action – if your hand causes you to stumble cut it off; your foot, cut it off; your eye, cut it off. Maybe he uses such strong language because he knows that this attitude of scapegoating others for our problems, of blaming other people for our sins, of naming them as the problem – that is the path that leads human beings to Gehenna, the place where the casualties of our scapegoating pile up, the stench of our own sin wafts thick in the air, where the worm never dies and the fire is never quenched.

It is the path that human beings are susceptible to, even and especially those of us who say we want to follow Jesus, the sin to which we are often prone. The sin that undergirds both the violence of ISIS and the violence of our nation's military industrial complex. The sin that undergirds our Jim Crow. The sin that undergirds the division of churches – Protestant and Catholic, conservative and liberal, high and low. The sin that tries to pin our country's shortcomings on the gay agenda, or the feminist agenda, or the conservative agenda, or foreigners, or capitalists or socialists. It's making scapegoats out of other people rather than looking first within.

And the challenge for followers of Jesus is trying to train that tendency out of our behavior if not out of our hearts. In some ways, that's what church is for. A people who know that our human proclivity to scapegoat others is so deep that we'll all be tested by that temptation many times over. A people who know that even Jesus' closest followers can hear words about forgiveness, and welcome, and reconciliation, and peace clearly several times over and still find themselves arguing over who is the greatest, or trying to stop someone from healing people because he's not authorized by the group, or preventing children or other people made vulnerable in our world from coming to Jesus after he's warned them directly several times.

That's what the church is for. To help train people in a different kind of neighborliness, one that leads to life instead of Gehenna, that place that symbolizes the worst our kind does to each other, that place of human misery. That's what the church is for. To help us salt the world with a different way of living and being and loving and giving, than the scapegoating that destroys humanity.

The New York Times yesterday told the story of a South Carolina community afraid of Syrian refugees. No actual Syrian refugees have come to town, but that didn't stop 200 of our fellow citizens from gathering together to feed off each other's fears. "They don't plan to assimilate," a local businessman told the crowd, "they

don't plan to take on our culture. They plan to change the way of American life."³ One resident asked if the refugees could be sent home on ships. Another asked if they could be sent on a plane to Saudi Arabia. When the answer was no he said, "Do we shoot them? Come on! I mean, this is crazy."

Despite the fear mongering, the Anderson Mill Road Baptist Church already has dozens of members who have completed refugee support training. "It's very hard to read your Bible," the pastor of the church said, "and refuse refuge to people who are vulnerable." It was a small voice next to all the fear mongering. It was only a paragraph of hospitality and welcome in a sea of newsprint of fear and exclusion. But if you've read your Bible, you know that it only takes a little salt to season the whole batch.

And in the words of the Baptist pastor, I could almost hear Jesus finishing his sentences. Yes, it's painful for us to welcome people when we're afraid. Yes, it's painful for us to welcome people when our neighbors are criticizing us for it. Yes, it's painful to give a welcome when the fear of the other is so much easier to sell, not just in South Carolina, but across our nation, across the world. But we're trying to purify ourselves of fear, and hate, and those scapegoating tendencies. We're trying to learn to love, trying to learn to give, trying to learn to live. We're trying to be a little bit of a salt to a world so obsessed with blaming our failings on others that we'll rewrite our Bibles in the process. We're trying to be a little bit of salt to a world that needs healing and hope.

The Pope has caused quite a stir this week. But you notice that it's not in the announcements of new programs, or the changing of doctrines. It's in meeting face to face with victims of clergy abuse; it's stopping motorcades and parades to embrace children, people with disabilities, and the poor. It's telling world leaders that peace is worth the risks, that the earth is a home that we all must care for, that the economy must be judged by who it excludes. The Pope has offered little more than the example of someone with power acting like a human being who values other human beings simply for being the gift that they are. A little salt goes a very long way.

³ Richard Fausset, "Refugee Crisis in Syria Raises Fears in South Carolina," *The New York Times*, September 25, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/26/us/refugee-crisis-in-syria-raises-fears-in-south-carolina.html>