

Deeds of Power
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James 5:13-20

¹³Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. ¹⁴Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. ¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. ¹⁷Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

¹⁹My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, ²⁰you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Mark 9:38-50

³⁸John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." ³⁹But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

⁴²"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. ⁴³If 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. ⁴⁵And 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. ⁴⁷And 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 to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

⁴⁹"For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

When was the last time you heard someone who didn't believe in Jesus do something good in his name? Ever? Me, neither. Yet that is exactly what has happened in today's reading from Mark. Back then there were many seeking to lead others to revolution, seeking to lead others out from under Roman rule. We've heard other New Testament stories of people claiming to follow others, such as John the Baptist. These followers, and these leaders, were neither political nor religious. They were both, in a way that does not exist in our current time. Religion and politics were fully inseparable then, to the point that they did not exist separately. It's a strange concept for us who rarely connect our faith to our politics except, perhaps, to help guide us in evaluating the morals of the candidates.

Yet then, trying to effect change would have come from a faith-filled interpretation of the Torah and one's methods would reflect the history of the Israelites. Prophets calling for change were known for

their acts of power done in God's name and with God's power. Whoever the person casting out demons was, he saw the influence Jesus was having and must have figured connecting himself to Christ was a good way to get people to notice him. Indeed, he did get the disciples to notice him. And then they became protective of the work Jesus was doing and the revolution they perceived him to be leading. To the gathered crowd, they might have said, "This man is an impostor! Do not follow him! Follow Jesus the Messiah!" and to him, "Stop what you are doing right now. Who are you to claim to be working in God's name? Only the Son of Man has been chosen to be God's messenger. Enough!"

Their reaction confirmed he was on the right track - this Jesus had power; if he played his cards right, when the tide turned for Jesus, as it does for every leader of change, he could be ready to become the next leader. And so he refused to back down. The disciples, offended, went off to find sympathy, and perhaps shared righteous anger, in Jesus. Jesus' behavior was a surprise, again. "Do not stop him." "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward." Can you hear them, "But, but, he was claiming he had the same authority as you"? "Listen to me: do not stop him."

We understand with the clarity of time and an overview of the Bible why Jesus would have said this. Jesus gave the great commission to go and make disciples of every nation, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Go; do good work in God's name, he commanded. Go; do good work in my name, he commanded. Once you have experienced that, once you have seen with your own eyes and felt with your own heart what it means to be the hands and feet of Christ, you will not speak against him.

What about all those people who we think are doing church wrong? Who have misunderstood the gospel as far as we're concerned? Who are using Jesus' name in ways that don't look like the ways we think are right? I'm not talking about Westboro Baptist Church or Jim Bakker and neither was Jesus. Whoever does a deed of power in my name, *δύναμις* (dunamis) in Greek, a miracle. Not those who mislead others or those who do hateful, powerful things using the name of Jesus. Those who do things which bring glory to God through what they have done. Those who demonstrate God's love in a way that is not familiar or even approved. The Catholic parish in which I was raised, at the time when AIDS was first being seen as an outbreak, suggested that AIDS was God's punishment for sin. In contrast, shortly after I was married, my husband and I attended a wedding in a Presbyterian church, where we saw a sign-up sheet for outreach efforts to people suffering from AIDS. Deeds of power, demonstrations of God's love.

And, Jesus continues: woe to anyone who puts a stumbling block before one of these little ones who

believe in me. Last week's reading from Mark directly precedes this week's reading. "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." If you remember, the child and the servant of all were symbols of the lowest ranks in society at the time. In our other reading from this morning, James uses the powerful images of the sick and the sinner. Our worldview is one that defines sickness wholly separate from sin. Even if we trust this, we cannot overlook the commonalities between the sick and the sinner.

If you have ever been sick in bed for an extended amount of time or contagious and quarantined or confined to a wheelchair, you know how tangible the separation from others can be. If you have made a mistake, a bad decision which has hurt others or which is seen as shameful in the eyes of society, you know what it is like to be on the outside. If you feel you are not as worthy as others because of the choices you have made or the life you have lived or simply because you are not like everyone else, you see a wall which keeps you on the outside where you believe you belong. There exists a stumbling block, one which should not be there. James encourages us with ways to bridge those distances, to come together in community, those on the outside inviting others in and those on the inside seeking out the ones who are missing or distant. Jesus tells us what to expect if we choose to leave them out, if we continue to look down on the children and the servants of our own day.

"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. 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. 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. 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 to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched."

I imagine you won't be surprised if I tell you there is more depth and context to this reading beyond our perceptions of hell. γέενναν (Gehennan, from Gehenna) was a literal place which held figurative significance for the Jewish people. The valley of the son of Hinnom, or the valley of Ge-Hinnom, was the place where children were sacrificed to the god Moloch, as referenced in Joshua, II Kings, and Jeremiah.¹ We read a word of the Lord from Jeremiah 7:31-32, "And they go on building the high place of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and daughters in the fire - which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind. Therefore the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when it will no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of Slaughter: for they will bury in Topheth until there is no more room." This is Gehenna, hell, a place

¹ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/6558-gehenna>

where those children whom Jesus exalts as the first were burned for a god. Gehenna, which later became a refuse dump where perpetual fires were maintained to prevent pestilence and stench.² “It is also the location where bodies of executed criminals, or individuals denied a proper burial, would be dumped.”³ You can see then how this place would come to represent the place where the wicked are punished after death. The figurative Gehenna: a place which had a gate in the sea, a gate in the wilderness, and the gate in Jerusalem in the valley of the son of Hinnom.⁴ Note the gate in the sea, where you could be tossed with a millstone around your neck.

Jesus is telling us what to expect if we choose to leave out those who are sick or have sinned, if we continue to look down on the children and the servants of our own day, and he is also talking about us. He begins, “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me” and he continues, “If your hand causes *you* to stumble...and if your foot causes *you* to stumble...And if your eye causes *you* to stumble...” Do not try to separate a child of God from the love of God, including yourself. “If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life, *eternal life*, maimed than to have two hands.” “And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life, *eternal life*, lame than to have two feet.” “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.”

If we choose to leave out those who are sick or have sinned, if we continue to look down on the children and the servants of our own day, if we choose to separate ourselves from the love of God then we are already in Gehenna for Gehenna is separation from God. Hell is separation from God. And here we must remember where this reading falls in the book of Mark. Jesus is heading toward death on a cross, toward the saving death by which “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”⁵

If we trust in that, why must we hear about hell? We hear about it so we remember that from which we have been saved. We hear about it so we remember that we are not to try to separate anyone from God’s love, including ourselves. We hear about it so we recognize in humility that our way is not the only way to offer God’s love. And we hear not only to refrain from the negative but to be encouraged toward the positive. We hear about it so we choose to do work in God’s name. We hear about it so we encourage others to seek and see God’s love around them and in a faith community where God’s message is clearest for them. We hear it so we can find our way out of the Gehenna we have created for

² <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/g/gehenna.html>

³ <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Gehenna>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Romans 8:38-39

ourselves. We hear it so we attempt deeds of power in the name of Christ. And we hear it so that, if we wander from the truth, we can be brought back. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: God of the lowest, we pray for your help that we might make no one stumble, especially ourselves. Keep us strong that we might not seek ways to be separate from you but, instead to come closer to you and to others in your name. Amen.