

Gospel Reading: Mark 9:38-50
Sunday, Sept. 27, 2009
The Rev. Tom Hagood

If you think about it, isn't our worship service a lot like going to the theater. Each of you comes here with some sort of expectation in mind of what will happen. You get your program ... you check what we're singing ... you see what the choirs up to ... you might even check out the title of my sermon if I wrote one.

You may have come to church with the assumption that you are going to be entertained ... to hear the hymns you want to hear ... to listen with delight to the stirring anthems of our choir ... and maybe even to hear a sermon that will amuse with stories and anecdotes.

After all ... since you sit out there and I stand up here ... you must be the audience. And if you are the audience, well then that makes me the actor ... I get to dress up in this robe ... this costume ... assisted by other actors including Wendy Dewberry and David Flick. And if the show isn't pleasing to you ... maybe you don't hear any hymns you recognized ... or my sermon is too dry and boring ... or David, heaven forbid, hits a flat instead of a sharp ... well then, you just might have to give us two thumbs down.

But do you ever think where God fit in to all this ... this worship ... this production ... this Theater of the Divine? The 19th Century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard certainly thought about it. He made it clear that the metaphor I just described is all wrong. According to him ... I do not have the starring role in the production ... and you are not an audience waiting to be entertained. Kierkegaard places God squarely at the center of worship ... first by reminding us that you ... the congregation ... the so-called audience ... are the primary actors ... you have the lead role in this production.

And as for my role ... and David's role ... and Wendy's role ... and the role of the choir ... well, we are just the supporting cast. And God ... according to Kierkegaard ... is the audience ... all we do in word and song and prayer and offering and confession ... is focused at God ... God, the audience. And if that is the case ... and God is the audience ... then how we act ... what we pray ... what we confess ... and even how we react and treat one another in this church ... friend and stranger alike ... is live on stage before God.

So if you think about it ... when we gather in church, even though we try to put on our best persona ... our best mask ... to express our piety in ways that surely must be pleasing to our Lord, our God ... God doesn't necessarily listen to the words we say ... or the hymns we sing ... or even to my sermons ... God is actually looking straight into our hearts ... all of our hearts ... and seeing who we really are ... in a sense measuring the words we say against the love or lack of love found in our hearts and our lives.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus makes it quite clear that what we think, say or do ... and how it impacts other people's live, particularly young children and those who have just found their faith in Christ ... will decide our own fate.

Listen closely with your heart to the word of our Lord from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 9, verses 38-50.

38 John 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."

39 But 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.

41 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.

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.

43 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.

45 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.

47 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,

48 where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

49 "For everyone will be salted with fire.

50 Salt 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."

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the word of our Lord and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

One of our devoted elders, Lyman Wray, has come down with a case of the swine flu. We've been emailing one another, but I haven't paid him a personal visit yet. However, after reading this passage from Mark earlier in the week, I toyed with idea of paying him a visit ... so I wouldn't have to show up today.

These words are tough to preach about. They are sharp and biting. They leave little room for me to maneuver ... you know, to try and make something out of them that might be a little easier for us to stomach.

But you've got to remember, Jesus isn't a lecturer. He isn't teaching a seminary class. As one writer puts it, "Jesus was not a Professor at Cambridge (or) Harvard. He was a Semite, speaking to ordinary Semites. For Jesus and his people, the bigger the truth the more exaggerated the language might be. Get this right and his teaching packs a punch. Get it wrong and some earnest souls end up with a literalism which leads to grave religious excesses." (*Prayers, Collects and Litanies* by Bruce Prewer, Uniting Church in Australia.)

So yes ... I don't believe Jesus is literally telling us to cut off a hand or an eye or a foot if it caused us to stumble and be thrown into hell. However, because of the enormity of his exaggeration ... I don't believe he is trying to water down the truth of what he is telling his disciples and us. Because how we act as Christians does make a difference. How we live and model our lives ... both outside these walls ... as well as inside ... does make a difference.

In our reading, Jesus is beginning to attract followers ... not just followers who are amazed at his miracles ... but followers ... new disciples ... who are amazed at what he says. He's talking about our relationship with God and with each other in a whole new way. He's not telling me to go to the temple and buy a bird or a lamb and sacrifice it ... he's talking about praying to God who knows me and loves me unconditionally ... he tells me that the only two laws that really are important are to love God with all my heart, mind and strength and to love my neighbor as I love myself.

This isn't what my rabbi tells me to do ... this is so freeing ... so wonderfully liberating ... so full of grace ... if the word had been coined in the time of Jesus. But ... it's not cheap grace. It's not grace without confession ... it's not grace without forgiveness ... it's not grace without reconciliation ... it's not grace without acceptance and sharing ... it's not grace without first turning your life around and following Christ. And it's not grace without true worship ... from the heart.

Maybe you never thought about it ... but how you worship while here on Sunday morning is actually a whole lot more involved than just sitting in a pew and following the Order of Worship ... particularly if you are on stage and God is the audience. From the moment you leave your home and begin your journey to the church ... you are on stage before the Lord.

The scenes are varied from one actor to the next ... but each one is important. Think about it ... even before you arrive ... who have you invited to worship at Columbia this week? And when you get here ... who do you first greet on a Sunday morning? Do you just find your friends and carry on a conversation about what you did during the week or share some juicy bit of gossip? Or do you intentionally look for the stranger ... the visitor ... and make a beeline for him or her?

Are you willing to show the love of Christ by inviting a visitor to sit with you and to answer any questions they might have about the church? Would you even be willing to offer a visitor the time to drink a cup of coffee or to have lunch after church? But coming to church is even a lot more than just invitations and greetings.

What about during worship? Where is your mind ... your thoughts ... as worship begins? Do you center yourself on Christ ... by focusing on who you are worshipping ... or do you fidget ...

watching the clock ... checking off the items in your bulletin ... your mind occupied with a whole list of things to do and if I would just hurry up and get through with my sermon ... or if we didn't have to sing all the stanzas of every hymn ... or if Wendy didn't pray so long ... or if the choir would just sing one anthem instead of two ... then you could get out of here.

So the question becomes, what are you willing to leave behind when you come to church to worship the Lord? Are you willing to come to church with the realization that you are going to meet Jesus Christ in his house ... not yours ... that you are a guest who is welcome ... and you are called to welcome others. After all ... God is the audience ... you are on stage.

And what about those children? Heaven forbid, sometime they drop things ... or talk when they shouldn't ... or get up and move around and it's so distracting. Have you ever asked someone in the church to do something about that? My answer to that question is quite simple ... have you taken the time, like Jesus, to take a child under your wing and sit with them in worship ... to take the time to lead them through a service ... to share in the singing of a hymn ... to give guidance and support ... love and understanding ... instead of a righteous eye of disdain.

Wendy recently shared with me something she found about children in worship that touched my heart and made me think long and hard about how we welcome children to this place ... I want to share with you . . . “Your church might meet in a cathedral that stuns the world with its beauty, but if children do not feel loved there, it is worth nothing. And your church might have 5,000 members and its own television show, but if children don't want to be there, it comes to nothing. Your church might be generous and give all of its money to feed the poor, but if you are not gentle and generous with the children on your own doorstep, it means nothing.”

There's a lesson to be learned in those words. Sure beats a millstone. Do you see ... sharing the love of Christ can actually become a part of your worship experience here at Columbia. Instead of church on Sunday just being an event you feel you have to go to once a week because it's a habit ... or someone makes you go ... what if going to church became an actual opportunity for you to demonstrate the love of Christ to others ... a place for mission ... particularly, as Christ tells us, to the *little ones who believe in me* ... the children ... the new disciples ... even to someone who is lost and has somehow found his way into our church.

What if someone sees something in your eyes ... or in the joy of your voice ... or in your caring smile ... that shows you want to be here ... that you want to share the love of Christ with all who enter this place ... that you want to welcome the children ... the lonely ... the anxious ... the confused ... the sinner who comes here just like you and me. What if you took the time to speak to a child after church and really learn his or her name so you could welcome them the next time you saw them? What if you greeted a visitor by saying something more than just, “Nice to meet you,” but went a bit further and let her know that your Sunday School class meets before church and you are welcome to come try us on for size.

What if the love of Christ became an active part of your worship experience in this place instead of just coming to sit and observe in this place as a frozen chosen Presbyterian? In this community of faith ... we are all called to minister to one another and to the stranger ... to the child ... and to each other.

In this place of worship ... we are also called to worship God not just with our minds ... but with our hearts in loving devotion to the One who claims us ... who leads us ... who unconditionally loves us ... who saves us through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. May the joy of worshipping God in this place spill over into our lives ... filling us with the joy and hope for the days ahead ... calling others to join us in our journey together.

Let us pray:

There's a spirit in the air,

Telling Christians everywhere,

“Praise the love that Christ revealed,

Living, working, in our world.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.