

October 15, 2006
Pentecost 19

"Who Will Be the First to Be the Peace-maker?"

MARK 9:38-50

Teacher, said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us." ³⁹"Do not stop him," Jesus said. "No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, ⁴⁰for whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward. ⁴²"And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. ⁴³If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out.[a] ⁴⁵And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell.[b] ⁴⁷And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck 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, ⁴⁸where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.[c] ⁴⁹Everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰"Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other."

"Who will be the first to be the peace-maker?" I can still hear my father saying when we were little kids fighting with each other over something that was totally unimportant. Oh, how I did not like to hear those words! "Who will be the peace-maker?" It meant that I had to examine my own heart and get rid of angry or hurtful thoughts and say I was sorry to my brother or my sister. My sinful nature did not want to give in at first. But then the new person I am in Christ through the blessings of the Holy Spirit and baptism enabled me to say that I was sorry and make peace with my brother or sister.

The words just read to you ended with Jesus saying, "And be at peace with each other." Jesus is talking to his beloved disciples as if they were his children. Read earlier in this chapter and you discover the disciples of Jesus were arguing among themselves like little kids over who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus had to take a child in his arms and say, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me." If you want to be important in God's kingdom then think about how you might serve others such as the little children or others who are weak in their faith. There is no time to fight with each other or even have hard feelings with each other because there are children that need to be served and blessed.

There is an old Chinese proverb that says, "The higher the bamboo, the more it bends low." Did you ever see bamboo growing along a stream or river here in California? The higher it grows, the more it bends down and bends over. The highest people in the kingdom of God are those who are willing bend low to be the peace-makers and to humble themselves and serve others. Philippians 2 tells us, "Do nothing out of self ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves." "Your attitude should be the same as Jesus Christ." Then it goes on to say how Jesus humbled himself, and became obedient to

death, even death on the cross.

I am thankful that my father helped us when we were kids by talking to us about being the first to be a peace-maker. I am thankful for these words of Jesus that speak to all of us here this morning, whether we are kids who get in fights at home, or husbands and wives who have tensions in marriage, or even members of a congregation such as Star of Bethlehem who may be tempted to think they are so important in God's kingdom they can ignore others who need help. "Who will be the first to be the peace-maker?"

Peace-makers know they have to fight

If you want to be a peace maker than you know you have a real battle on your hands with your own sinful pride and stubbornness that does not want to give in. Notice how the disciples try to avoid thinking about getting along with each other by pointing to another problem they had seen with someone who was throwing out evil spirits in Jesus' name. "Teacher, said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop because he was not one of us." There is an old saying, "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen." Well, the disciples were good at trying to avoid the heat Jesus was putting on them for not getting along with each other. They pointed out the problems in another person. It is so easy to ignore problems we have in ourselves by finding spiritual problems in other people. Even kids do that when they fight with each other. "He hit me first." "He started it." Pass the blame on to someone else.

The disciples were not happy with a man who was throwing out demons in the name of Jesus without being part of their elite group. If we get totally caught up with our own importance, our own agenda and our own way of doing things, we may easily lose sight of how God can work through other people to spread his Word, even if they are not part of "our group." If we are faithful to God's Word in these last days, and if we believe that God works faith in people through the blessings of Baptism and Lord's Supper, then we might conclude that God would pour out some special dispensation and provide us with greater opportunities to reach people with the gospel. Then we see how the Lord is using other churches in these last days where the full gospel is not proclaimed, but still part of the gospel is there. "They are not one of us." "They don't have the pure teaching." Yet, the Lord still uses them. The Bible is being opened up to people and they are learning about Jesus. Rather than joining the disciples in saying, "They are not one of us," we join in saying, "Praise the Lord for the way his kingdom is growing, even without us."

Jesus wants the disciples to be better peace-makers. He humbles them further by telling them not to stop this person who was healing in his name but not part of their group. "Do not stop him. No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name, because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward."

Have you ever been blessed, I mean really blessed by someone who was not part of your congregation, or even your denomination, who spoke God's Word to you in very comforting way? I think of a time when I served a much larger congregation in Tucson. The counseling load was heavy. There were people in the hospital. The needs of people

were almost overwhelming. I received a phone call. It was the wrong number. Then the person on the other end of the line said: "Are you a pastor of a church?" That started a conversation with a total stranger. He spoke about reading the Bible for the first time and becoming a Christian. We talked about the peace we had in Jesus and the comfort of his Word. We even shared Bible verses with each other. That person had the rich reward of sharing God's Word with me. I had the rich reward of sharing the Word with him. He was a total stranger, not even a member of our congregation, or member of our denomination, but he was a member of the Holy Christian church and the body of Christ. You never know who will give you the next cool drink of water. It may not be the pastor of your church or a member of your congregation. Peace-makers are open to seeing blessings from other members of the body of Christ.

A peace-maker knows that petty arguments and infighting and hard feelings are going to hurt people, especially the little ones in the faith. "And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into sea with a large millstone tied around his neck." When mom and dad fight in front of the kids, or say harsh things to each other, or fail to love each other, the kids soak it all in like sponges. The same is true for the disciples of Jesus who want to follow him closely. What good were the disciples for helping other people if they were arguing about being the greatest in the kingdom of God? Anytime there are arguments among Christians, or tensions, or hard feelings, or the me-first syndrome, the little ones suffer. Jesus has harsh words for those who selfishly think of themselves and lead others to stumble. It would be better for them if he were thrown into the sea with a larger millstone around his neck. Do you not sense how impatient Jesus is with the people who only think of themselves and their wants and not the little ones whom he wants to bless and hold in his arms?

Jesus, our loving Lord and Savior wants nothing to disrupt the peace we have in him and the hope of eternal life that is ours. That is why he issues another stern warning about opening ourselves up to sin and giving it a place to grow in our lives. "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed than with two hands go into hell where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck 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 does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'" It is so hard for us to think about a place of eternal fire, eternal suffering and eternal pain. Jesus makes it clear that such a place of everlasting punishment does exist and it is real. He tells us that he wants us to take every measure necessary to get rid of sin in our lives so it does not lead us to this place of torment. Obviously he is not telling us to start cutting off the parts of the body that sin. Eventually we would have no body parts left. What Jesus wants us to do is to take a serious look at our lives and check the dangerous places where we might be cultivating sinful behavior and even justifying what we do wrong. Firefighters in California know they have to watch the hotspots in a fire and keep them under control. It is so easy for them to flair up and cause the fire to roar out of control. The same thing is true of the places in our lives, the weak spots, where we are cultivating things that are contrary to God's will. The more we justify them and allow them to grow, the greater danger we will be of losing everything.

Who will be the peace-maker? Who will think of others more than themselves? Who will care about the little ones and not offend them over some silly argument or selfish action?

Who will step up and say, "Let me be the first to tackle sinful behavior in my life that threatens my faith and might cause me to lose the peace I have in Jesus? Being a peace-maker is hard business, an impossible task unless you see the peace you have in Jesus.

Peace makers know the battle is won in Jesus

Jesus helps us see the peace we have in him with the picture of salt. "Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how you make it salty again. Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other." Salt was used to preserve things. The fire of God's judgment will someday free this world from all sin. The fire of God's judgment also burned hot on the day Jesus died when he was punished in our place with our sins. The fire of God's wrath poured itself out on Jesus when he was "stricken, smitten and afflicted for our sin." When he paid the price, he cried out, it is finished. The fire of God's wrath had done its job. The sin of the world was paid for. Jesus made peace with God. The night of his resurrection he appeared to his disciples and said, "Peace be to you." Here he is picturing this peace with salt, salt that preserves and saves.

Our Lord Jesus tells us: "Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with each other." He pleads with everyone here today to believe in the salt he has provided to save us, his precious blood that was shed for us that cleanses us from all sin. With this perfect peace and forgiveness we have in Jesus we will stand pure and holy for the judgment to come. We also stand ready to say, "Let me be first?" When someone asks, "Who will be the peace-maker?" Eagerly we raise our hands and say, "I will. I will." Amen.