

*This message was delivered by Rev. Pamela Graf Short to the People of Prayer at the Tontogany Presbyterian Church on Sunday, September thirtieth, the nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost in the year of our LORD two thousand and eighteen.*

Mark 9:38-50

**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.

**40** Whoever 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.

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

**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.

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

**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."

Our Bible story for today overlaps with last week's lesson where the disciples argue about who is the greatest and Jesus responds by saying...

*"Whoever wants to be first*

*must be last of all and servant of all."*

And then Jesus takes a child and says

*"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."*

It seems the disciples are rather slow learners for immediately following this admonition,

John pipes up and says,

"Hey! Speaking of 'in your name', we just saw someone casting out demons in **Your** Name and we tried to stop him; after all he's not one of us!"

We worry a lot these days if someone is one of us...

Jesus provides a different view:

If someone is not working against us,  
they are obviously for us.

We focus on whose in and whose out.

Jesus' focus is on hospitality;

Jesus pays attention to the person who serves a single glass of water;

Jesus is glad to reward their kindness.

Jesus' focuses on children;  
on the weak and the overlooked; the used and the abused.

Basically Jesus' message goes something like this:

You want to focus on the other guy;

You want to make sure they know they are out of your circle.

Here's a religious concept:

Try looking inward.

Try scrutinizing yourself.

Try examining your life, instead of worrying about somebody else;

Try inspecting the fire beneath your own feet instead of rebuking someone whose feet are standing next to a well of water.

Jesus uses some cultural figures of speech to rebuke the disciples.

Cut off your hand!

Cut off your foot!

Tear out your eye!

It is a little bit like us telling someone

"Go stand in front of a Mac Truck"

Or have you ever said to your spouse, 'If I do thus and so, just take me out and shoot me'".

Did you ever hear hyperbole and therefore dismiss it in the moment, only to go home and ponder what was being said and finding in it more truth than you wanted to hear?

Is it possible that you and I are guilty of being stumbling blocks; of causing not only ourselves to sin, but living in such a way that little ones and weak ones and lonely ones lose faith?

How many of us have overlooked an idea a child puts forth, and therefore crushed his spirit?

How many of us have been buzzing around with such fervor that we have no time to listen to a child's prayer or song or story?

How many of us lack the motivation to take seriously a child's question, dismissing her curiosity, and choosing instead to read our text messages and send Emojis?

How many of us give no thought to the children who don't have enough of what they need because we insist on cheap goods?

How many of us take our anger and our fears and our loneliness and our neediness and dump it on a child?

O it is far better that a mill stone be hung around my neck and I sink down to the bottom of the Maumee than to face the eternal punishment due me if I abuse a child for my own personal satisfaction.

As strong as these warnings are;

as sure as they tell of our bodies capacities to hurt ourselves and harm others;

as clearly as Jesus speaks about the very real presence of hell; Jesus does not let us without hope.

"For everyone will be salted with fire."

Here we are reminded that fire is a purification process;

a process we all need to endure, however painful.

Potters understand the importance of fire in hardening the clay.

I am told that salt is sometimes thrown into the kiln at high temperatures.

*"The salt vaporizes, and sodium vapor combines with silica in clay surface, forming extremely hard sodium-silicate glaze."*<sup>i</sup>

*“Not only does salt glazing seal the ware, but it creates a distinctive orange-peel texture that has become a desirable decorative trait.”<sup>iii</sup>*

“Everyone will be salted with fire.”

Jesus intent therefore is not that we harm our bodies,  
but that we trust ourselves to God’s process of forming and reforming;  
of purifying us;  
of salting us that we might become stronger and more beautiful servants of Christ’s welcoming hospitality.

One of my favorite children’s authors is George MacDonald, a pastor and theologian of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He describes God’s purifying fire in his book *The Princess and Curdie*. MacDonald paints the character of God as a great-great-grandmother who lives in an attic. Curdie is a teenage boy who works in the silver mines of the king. As he enters the attic room and he sees a wonder:

*“on a huge hearth a great fire was burning,  
and the fire was a huge heap of roses,  
and yet it was fire.  
The smell of the roses filled the air,  
and the heat of the flames of them glowed upon his face.  
He turned an inquiring look upon the lady,  
and saw that she was now seated in an ancient chair, the legs of which were crusted with gems,  
but the upper part like a nest of daisies and moss and green grass.*

*'Curdie,' she said in answer to his eyes,  
'you have stood more than one trial already,  
and have stood them well:  
now I am going to put you to a harder.  
Do you think you are prepared for it?'*

*'How can I tell, ma'am,' he returned,  
'seeing I do not know what it is, or what preparation it needs? Judge me yourself, ma'am.'*

*'It needs only trust and obedience,'  
answered the lady.*

*'I dare not say anything, ma'am.  
If you think me fit, command me.'*

*'It will hurt you terribly, Curdie, but that will be all; no real hurt but much good will come to you from it.'*

*'Go and thrust both your hands into that fire,'  
she said quickly, almost hurriedly.*

*Curdie dared not stop to think.  
It was much too terrible to think about.  
He rushed to the fire, and thrust both of his hands right into the middle of the heap of flaming roses,  
and his arms halfway up to the elbows.*

*And it did hurt!  
But he did not draw them back.  
He held the pain as if it were a thing that would kill him if he let it go— as indeed it would have done.  
He was in terrible fear lest it should conquer him. But when it had risen to the pitch that he thought he could bear it no longer, it began to fall again,  
and went on growing less and less until by contrast with its former severity it had become rather pleasant.  
At last it ceased altogether,  
and Curdie thought his hands must be burned to cinders if not ashes, for he did not feel them at all.*

*The princess told him to take them out and look at them.*

*He did so, and found that all that was gone of them was the rough, hard skin;  
they were smooth like the princess's.*

*'Come to me,' she said.*

*He obeyed and saw, to his surprise,  
that her face looked as if she had been weeping.*

*'Oh, Princess! What is the matter?' he cried.  
'Did I make a noise and vex you?'*

*'No, Curdie, she answered; 'but it was very bad.'*

*'Did you feel it too then?'*

*'Of course I did. But now it is over, and all is well.*

*Would you like to know why I made you put your hands in the fire?'<sup>iii</sup>*

The Princess goes on to explain that Curdie now has the gift of discernment. When he shakes hands with a person, he will know whether that person's hand is the hand of someone who is growing into a beast, or one who is growing more human.

It seems to me that MacDonald must have had this passage from Mark in mind when he wrote this story. He goes on not only to talk about hands and feet, but there is a part where, like the disciples, Curdie thinks he knows at a glance who is good and who isn't. To that the Princess responds:

*'Ah! But you must beware, Curdie, how you say of this man or that man that he is travelling beastward. There are not nearly so many going that way as at first sight you might think. When you met your father on the hill tonight, you stood and spoke together on the same spot; and although one of you was going up and the other coming down, at a little distance no one could have told which was bound in the one direction and which in the other. Just so two people may be at the same spot in manners and behaviour, and yet one may be getting better and the other worse, which is just the greatest of all differences that could possibly exist between them.'<sup>iv</sup>*

Well, as you may guess, Curdie goes on to be the hero of the story and save the kingdom.

How will your story end? How will mine? Jesus ends today's Bible story with this command:

“Have salt in yourselves  
and be at peace with one another.”

Now may our God of fire and salt  
The One who shares your pain  
Refine you in flames of love  
Salt you in unique beauty  
Hold you in tender mercies  
And surround you with peace  
Now and forever more.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://ceramicartsnetwork.org/category/firing-techniques/salt-firing-and-soda-firing/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://ceramicartsnetwork.org/daily/firing-techniques/salt-firing-and-soda-firing/super-salt-glaze-and-slip-recipes-an-excerpt-from-our-new-free-download-the-salt-glaze-s>

<sup>iii</sup> MacDonald, George. *The Princess and Curdie*. Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott Company, 1908.

<sup>iv</sup> *ibid*