

John runs to Jesus saying, “We saw this unknown, un-credentialed healer out doing spectacular things, using your name when he is not even one of us.”

Jesus says, “If he’s doing no harm, he’s doing good; if he’s not against us, he’s for us. Let him alone.”

What a great example of Jesus being inclusive, affirming, accepting, and broad-minded!

Then Jesus turns to his disciples, the insiders and, refusing to get further involved in this conversation about unknown healers, says, “As for you! Any of you who cause one of my little ones to stumble, it would be better to have your arm hacked off, your foot amputated, and your eye gauged out.”

What?

“Well, it’s better to grope around handless, footless, blind than to land in Gehenna with limbs intact.”

Gehenna, what’s Gehenna? Genenna was a valley just outside Jerusalem’s walls. Way back, it had been a place for the worship of the worst of heathen gods, the dreaded Moloch to whom children were killed and sacrificed. In Jesus’ time it was the town dump, full of smoldering fire and rotting animal carcasses, and also where the bodies of the most despised criminals were dumped and left to rot.

That, Jesus says, is the final destination of those of us who present a stumbling block for the little ones!

Doesn’t sound very inclusive, affirming, accepting, and broad-minded does it?

Jesus gives us something to think about in today’s passage. He has very high expectations of those who should know what it means to follow, those in the family, those he’d have called “the children of Israel, and even higher expectations of his own disciples. He has a much more tough-minded, take-no-prisoners frame of mind, about them! Today, that would be, us, the members of his church.

He’s given us the gift of life, so we should be giving life to others. He’s equipped us to be “the salt of the earth,” so we should be able to be the salt, a life-giving presence, to those around us. When we don’t fulfill that basic calling – sharing the life we’ve been given, it’s as bad as salt losing it’s saltiness.

That’s because, as the prophets said, “Judgment begins with God’s own house.”

He severely warns the inner circle, his closest followers. And what’s the first thing he warns them about, the top thing on his list – their responsibility to “the little ones.” He says that there’ll be hell to pay for those who’ve been closest who create a stumbling block for those who are weak, those who are on top to abuse those on the bottom, those who are big and in the know who mislead the “little ones.”

Our faithfulness is shown in how we deal with “the little ones.”

Why is that so important?

Because the “little ones” are vulnerable, easily dominated, controlled and manipulated. Jesus doesn’t want that for them; he wants them to have life that’s good, whole, joyful.

They’re impressionable, easily led, shaped, and molded by those who are around them. Jesus doesn’t want them to be led into paths that are hurtful and destructive; he wants them to be led in ways that leads to life. Most of all he wants them to be led toward God not away from God.

There’s a lot at stake in how we deal with the “little ones.”

The “stumbling blocks” we put up for them are as old as humanity.

Sometimes we exclude them; we don't want to be bothered with them.

Sometimes we neglect them, fail to be present with them, know what's going on with them, have expectations, or set boundaries. So, they're left on their own, to guide themselves through the world.

Sometimes we treat them harshly, even abusively, so they live in fear of our displeasure. Or we control or manipulate them for our own ends, so eventually they realize that they're a means to our ends.

Or we fail to model the faith we profess, are dishonest, use foul language. So they learn that being an adult means being able to do the things they're told they shouldn't do as a child.

Sometimes the faith we model instead is that life is about getting what you want. For many parents the worst thing that can happen to a child is to be deprived of what they want. Talk to teachers, coaches, youth leaders, and they'll tell you about the tantrums parents can throw, to intimidate or get sympathy. They've learned the power of screams and tears, and teach their children the same lesson.

Try to share concerns about their child's behavior with some parents. They don't welcome the information as something they need to know. No, they resent it and the one who shares it.

And try to say there should be consequences. There'll be hell to be pay. Parents will deny, cover-up, blame others, portray their child as a victim, all to manipulate the outcome for their child. Guess what they're doing in the process? Guess what they're teaching?

Sometimes the stumbling block isn't what we do to them, but to other people. We don't value relationships, or we make them dependent on people agreeing with us, not disappointing us, or making us angry. We cut ourselves off from involvement with people for such reasons, and say, "I'll find some other friends. As if anyone can really be our friend, our true friend. So, they learn that no relationship matters more than having one's own views affirmed, and no relationship can endure a disagreement.

Jesus is very concerned about the stumbling blocks that we create for the "little ones." He wants them to have life and he knows how our actions can deny it. He wants them to know, love, and trust him, and he knows how our actions can prevent that.

Jesus says they'll be "Gehenna" to pay if we do. We must not create stumbling blocks.

Our impulse may be to make things easier for them, and so we rationalize all kinds of things. But Jesus never said his way would be easy. He spoke of choosing the narrow way that leads to life; we need to help them do that. We've got to see that every time we call them off school when their not really sick, or ease their way with some other "little" lie, or let them avoid a responsibility they have to others, or tell them it's OK to do something that would make things fall apart if everybody did it, or excuse their misbehavior, or make them a victim when others point it out, we're creating a stumbling block.

But our responsibility doesn't end with ourselves. We share responsibility for children with others.

Most of us share responsibility with another parent.

That means that if a co-parent creates a stumbling block, by being controlling or manipulative, by being harsh or abusive, by disregarding honest and integrity, by discarding relationships, as if they didn't matter, or by modeling that life's about getting what you want, it needs to be challenged.

That means that we in the church are called to provide nurture in the spirit and way of Christ. So, we have to be faithful about making sure that all who work with children deal with them in the spirit and way of Christ, and even about challenging parents when they are neglecting that calling.

And we have to support and encourage them when they're drawn to the things of God.

How can we hope that they make keeping the Sabbath and worship a life-priority if it's not for us?

How can we hope that they'll give their hearts to mission and service, if we think they're too much of a bother to be part of the ones we're involved in? Or we don't want to hear their passion about the ones that have touched their hearts?

How can we hope they'll be the church, if we forget that we're brothers and sisters in Christ, a family! In a family you don't turn away from someone you disagree with, or who's disappointed you; they're still your brother or sister. That's how Jesus loves us and expects us to love one another. One of the greatest stumbling blocks we create for our children is to forget that, to discard people or relationships because of disappointments or disagreements, and go find another circle. Is that how God's treated us in Jesus? No, that's a denial of the essence of Jesus' love for us, and of what it means to be his people.

Jesus is saying that they'll be Gehenna to pay for those who care so little about the little ones, who in baptism, we promised to nurture in his way, but refuse to do the tough work of love that he did for us.

The fullest expression of that love was his going to the cross. He, who loved the little ones, made them the center of his kingdom, took upon himself the judgment of those who cared nothing about them. At the garbage dump, Gehenna, with pierced hands and feet, he showed God's righteous judgment, saying to us all, who, in our hardness of heart deserved to be in his place— "You are forgiven."

What can help us meet that responsibility is remembering his great love, love for us, his "little ones," who disappointed and hurt him so much. His willingness to love so completely, sacrifice so fully, transformed Gehenna from a horrid place of our judgment into the place of our salvation.

That's why the cross, a sign of suffering and shame, is a symbol of life for us. That's why we have hope of living something more than "getting what I want," and teaching our little ones to do the same.

That means our selfishness and pride don't have to make us constantly create stumbling blocks for our children. We can nurture them in Jesus way, show him his love, expect them to honor his teachings, and welcome them into his service.

If that's not good news, I don't know what is. I hope you think so, too.

Lord Jesus,

Help us not to tend our own little spiritual garden while we let the rest of the world go to hell.

Deepen our sense of responsibility for the spiritual welfare of our sisters and brothers

...who may not have had the formation, the advantages, and the wise guidance

...that have benefited us in our faith journey.

Save us from the temptation to see the sins of others more clearly than we see our own.

Give us the grace to be easy on the faults of those who sit next to us in church this morning

...and also the grace to be more severe with the faults that besmirch our own souls.

Lord Jesus, save us from the temptation to be too easy on ourselves and too hard on everybody else.

Stand with us.

Though we have sometimes set aside our burdens too early,

...waited for others to take up their crosses while we sat a distance away

...hoping that our own cup would be taken away, we mean now to be your disciples in all things.

Forgive us. Strengthen us. Lead us.

Amen.