***DON’T BE SO LITERAL!***

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Texts: Mark 9:38-48 and Ephesians 5:6-10

When our son Dan was just a young lad, he was sitting at the table eating breakfast one morning with Karen’s father, whom Dan called Papa. Dan had a cup of milk in front of him and after each sip, he set the cup down on the table. Papa wanted him to use the coaster on the table, and he told Dan to do so. When Dan continued to miss the coaster with his cup, Karen’s dad said to him firmly, “Dan, put your milk in the coaster.” So, Dan did as he was told; he looked Papa in the eye and poured his milk into the coaster. “Don’t be so literal,” Papa said, while acknowledging, “well, he just did what I told him to do.”

There are times when it is important to take something literally – as when someone yells, “Watch out!” or “Duck!” – and there are times when a literal interpretation misses the point completely. If I tell you that it is raining cats and dogs outside, most of you won’t run out to look for a pet, and those who do will be deeply disappointed. We use idioms, hyperbole, similes, and a host of other linguistic devices in our language day to day to say what we want to say. Why then would we think that such creative use of language would be less prevalent in Scripture? Yet there are those who insist that all the verses in the Bible are intended to be read literally. Like Nicodemus who struggled to understand how one could literally be “born again,” they are determined that the world is created in seven twenty-four-hour days in the order prescribed in Genesis 1, even though that requires some historical, literary, scientific, and theological somersaults to reconcile that account with the second creation story in Genesis 2-3 and with the discoveries of modern science. For all those who want to try to force such a literal reading on Scripture, I pose this question: Have you read Jesus’ words in the 9th chapter of Mark’s gospel?

That is the passage I read a few moments ago where Jesus says, “*If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. If your foot causes you to stumble, chop it off. If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out.*” This passage is probably not found in our Children’s Bibles! Do you really think Jesus intended those words to be taken literally? Remarkably, I don’t see folks who insist that all Scripture is to be read literally limping around without a foot or hand or making do without an eye. Either they have never sinned with any of those body parts – which is a little hard to believe – or they don’t take this passage literally! And if these verses are not intended to be literal, then perhaps some others might be open to a different understanding as well.

Scripture is rich in the variety of literary forms with which God’s Word is revealed to us. What makes Scripture God’s Word is not that it is **all** literally true, but rather that it is inspired by the Holy Spirit in its writing and in our hearing. That diversity is reflected in portions that **are** literally true, but also in letters (like those of Paul), poetry and song (as in the Psalms), laws, genealogies, gospels, prophecy, history, myths, parables, apocalyptic writings, wisdom literature, and more. It is evident in literary devices like acrostics, plays on words (which aren’t always as evident in English as they are in the original Hebrew), idioms, metaphors, and hyperbole. In the richness of language, we find the fingerprints of God tracing a line that runs across the generations to tell the story of God’s love for the world God made! It is a great story to tell, good news to share, hope-filled promises to hold in life and in death!

The challenge for us as interpreters is to assess how God is speaking to us in these words that are God’s Word. If we can shrug off the onerous burden of trying to interpret everything literally, then we need not worry that the creation accounts conflict in some details, for they convey a greater truth – one God created all things for God’s good purposes. We need not worry that Matthew has Jesus riding two donkeys into Jerusalem while Mark, Luke, and John has him riding only one, for they all are trying to tell us that in that ride Jesus is fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah about the coming of a King. We need not lose sleep over the ordering of events in Jesus’ life in different gospels since gospels are not written to record a chronological account of Jesus’ life but to inspire faith in him as the Savior of the world; and to that end each gospel writer takes a little different approach. But we do need to exert some effort not just to hear but to understand what God may be saying to us in the pages of Scripture. What then are we to make of this passage in Mark’s gospel. Perhaps as a starting point, instead of plucking out our eyes for the sins they have committed, we might offer a prayer:

*Open my eyes that I may see, glimpses of truth thou hast for me.*

*Place in my hands the wonderful key that shall unclasp and set me free.*

*Silently now I wait for thee, ready my God, thy will to see.*

*Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine![[1]](#endnote-1)*

Jesus’ message about severing sinful body parts comes near the end of a series of teachable moments with his disciples. The first arises when Jesus confronts them about an ongoing debate they had along the road to Capernaum – which one of them is the greatest. Jesus tells them that whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. He puts a new spin on greatness; it is found, not in power and prestige, but in humility and service. Then Jesus puts a child down in their midst and tells them: “*Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me*.” In so doing, Gary Charles notes:

*Jesus is asking his disciples to extend their hands and hearts to those who often feel only the back of the hand and the hardness of the human heart. A “child” for Jesus is more akin to an outcast, a person we avoid intentionally, than to an infant whom church members coo over in the nursery.*[[2]](#endnote-2)

Jesus is asking the disciples to extend the circle of their community to embrace those who stand outside that circle, to welcome the outsider and the outcast as they would welcome Jesus himself. *In welcoming them you welcome me*, he says.

How ironic then that on the heels of that teaching, John should raise with Jesus the issue of someone outside their circle who is casting out demons in Jesus’ name. We have no idea who he was – a pagan magician perhaps, or a Jewish exorcist using Jesus’ name in his work, or a believer but not a disciple who sought to imitate Jesus. We just don’t know. We know only that he was **not** one of the twelve. “We tried to stop him,” says John, “because he was not following **us**.” John doesn’t say: *he was not following* ***you***, nor does he say *he does not believe in* ***you***, but only *he was not following* ***us***. In so doing John makes being in the circle of believers the key to faithful action rather than faith; he takes issue with anyone who would dare to work a miracle outside of that inner circle of disciples around Jesus. What right had this outsider to heal in Jesus’ name?

How tempting it can be to judge those who stand outside our circle of faith – those who practice faith differently or worship in a different style or dress differently, those who speak in tongues or sit in silence or shout “Hallelujah!” to the rafters, those who sing praise songs instead of hymns or old hymns instead of praise songs! How tempting to dwell on the differences among us rather than affirming the unity we share in Christ! It is the temptation to be insular, self-righteous people instead of grace-filled communities. It is the temptation to judge, the temptation to exclude – *they’re not one of us*.

In a column in Friday’s Washington Post, Colbert King describes responses he received to a previous column, “A vanishing hope for peace in the Holy Land.” He writes:

*My previous column drew comments from some who jeered and ridiculed the faith of people praying and working for peace in that troubled land. And so it goes. Scorning the beliefs of others, especially those holding views not our own, appears to be a universal malady. It seems, however, to have a special application in the Holy Land, where religious leaders are the voices crying out on behalf of oppressed, needy people who have no helpers. That some of those voices are leaders of churches in Jerusalem makes the mocking and scoffing even more telling.*

It sounds like a modern version of John’s complaint to Jesus. They are wasting their time with prayers for peace! They are not like us; they are not one of us!

Jesus found no threat in the man who was casting out demons in his name and I seriously doubt he would discourage those praying for peace. “*Don’t stop him*,” he told the disciples. “*No one who does a miracle in my name will be able to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us*.” Jesus does not say, “Whoever is not **for us** is **against us**.” He says, “Whoever is not **against us** is **for us**.” It is a much larger circle, for Jesus recognizes that God’s hand may be at work beyond that small community of believers who surround him. He affirms that God’s power is at work in the world far beyond the disciples, beyond himself, beyond that church to which Mark wrote, and beyond us too. Jesus embraces a circle of faith that is bigger, broader, and more gracious than the disciples or we can imagine, and he urges all his disciples to embrace it too – a circle that encompasses not only those who follow Jesus each day, but also those who serve differently, worship differently, speak differently, or live differently, for those who welcome his disciples with a cool cup of water will “by no means lose the reward,” he says. And so with humility we pray:

*Open my ears, that I may hear voices of truth thou sendest clear.*

*And while the wave notes fall on my ear, everything false will disappear.*

*Silently now I wait for thee, ready, my God, thy will to see.*

*Open my ears; illumine me, Spirit divine!*

Which brings us to this odd passage about stumbling blocks. Trying to draw that circle of faith to exclude others was a “stumbling block” – a word whose Greek root is that from which our word *scandal* derives. There are a lot of things that may become stumbling blocks – self-righteousness, hypocrisy, judgmental attitudes, arrogance, and sometimes literalism. They pose a problem, not just for us, but for those brothers and sisters in the faith who are trying to discern what it means to be a faithful Christian, and for those trying to figure out whether there is any place for them in the community that follows Jesus. In hyperbolic terms – cutting off a hand or foot, tearing out an eye – Jesus makes clear that there is a place for all but no place for such stumbling blocks in the Kingdom of God and in that expanded circle of faith around him. Rather than think we can assure our place while throwing up hurdles for others, we should remove the stumbling blocks and do as he told those who want to be great to do: be a servant; welcome the children, the outcasts, and those at the fringes of society. For in serving them, we serve Christ. In welcoming them, we welcome Christ. In loving them we love Christ. That is what we are called to do. It is who we are called to be. And so we do welcome them and serve them and love them as we pray and sing:

*Open my mouth, and let me bear gladly the warm truth everywhere.*

*Open my heart, and let me prepare love with thy children thus to share.*

*Silently now I wait for thee, ready my God, thy will to see.*

*Open my heart; illumine me, Spirit divine!* AMEN

1. “Open My Eyes, That I May See”, Clara Scott, 1895 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Gary W. Charles and Brian K. Blount, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2002, p.182 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)