

Streetsville United Church  
Sunday, September 27, 2009  
Rev. John Tapscott

**"THE UNQUENCHABLE FIRE OF GOD'S LOVE"**

Mark 9:42-48

In Mark 9: 42-48, Jesus says, "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. 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 go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. 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 be thrown into hell. 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 be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched."

Do you find these words difficult? Do they make you uncomfortable? They don't fit our image of gentle Jesus, meek and mild, do they? But they're his words and so we must "deal with them."

Now in this passage Jesus uses two images which would have been familiar to the Jewish people and also quite frightening to them.

"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." Some Jews made their living fishing on Galilee, but most stayed far from the sea. Jews didn't have summer cottages along the Mediterranean coast. For them the sea was chaotic and frightening. When Jesus spoke of someone being thrown in the sea weighed down by a heavy millstone, it was a terrifying image. It's bad enough for us, but worse for the Jews, for whom drowning was a horrible way to die.

Jesus used another vivid image. "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 go to hell, to the unquenchable fire." The word Jesus used for hell was Gehenna, a valley outside Jerusalem where the Jews had once been grossly disobedient to God. Under the wicked kings Ahaz and Manasseh, the Jews sacrificed their first-born children, as their pagan neighbours did. Gehenna was the place of one of Israel's worst sins. And by Jesus' time this valley had become the Jerusalem city dump, always burning, full of worms. Gehenna was the physical symbol for final spiritual punishment, for hell. Jews shuddered at the thought. It was a place and a fate to be avoided.

"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones... it would be better if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the

sea... 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 be thrown into hell..." Jesus' words sounded just as harsh to his listeners as they do to us. They would have resisted them, just as we do. I want to consider why we find these words so difficult to accept. And when we do we may understand why Jesus said them. We also may find that, oddly enough, they bring us comfort and hope.

**One reason we find them difficult is because we don't take sin as seriously as Jesus did.**

Years ago, a book was written by a psychiatrist called, "Whatever Became of Sin?" And it's true. We underplay sin. We laugh at it, even promote it. Or we blame society or someone or something else. We figure that with enough education and sensitivity training sin can be eradicated. And the notion persists in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. Just a year ago the world financial system was brought to the point of collapse by the actions of greedy, manipulators with degrees from Harvard who live in expensive homes, and lack for nothing. And the world is still paying for their treachery. Ask the millions who have lost their jobs.

Jesus never laughed at sin or compromised with it. Never. He took sin and its' consequences very seriously. He saw the rich and powerful devouring widows' houses. He saw Roman cruelty. He saw the corruption of some religious leaders. He saw money-changers cheating worshippers in the temple. Jesus saw sin and named it sin. He saw unrighteousness and called people on it. Jesus himself was without sin, but he knew that sin's power would get him, too, which it did, when it nailed him to a cross. Jesus considered sin a matter of life and death, of heaven and hell. He knew what sin can do to individuals, to families, to communities, to nations. He knew that sin spoils human relationships and ruins our relationship with God. So "if you have to cut off your hand, pluck out an eye, or cut off your foot to avoid it," then do so, because sin is so harmful.

It's said that boxer Mohammed Ali had a unique way of resisting temptation. He always carried a small box of matches. Ali said, "Whenever I go to a party and feel tempted by a beautiful woman, I take out a match and strike it. Then I put it out with my fingers and remind myself, "Hell is a lot hotter than this."

When Jesus spoke of "little ones" who believe in him he perhaps meant children or new believers, or both. In any case, he loved those little ones. And so Jesus was very hard on those who put stumbling blocks to faith in their path or caused them to sin. Better for them to be drowned in the sea with a millstone around their neck.

You know, children of a certain age become curious about faith matters. They become interested in Bible stories. So parents, be careful. It's so easy to unwittingly say negative things in your home about the church, about the faith, and to quench your child's spiritual curiosity. Look, the world will try to do that soon enough. So don't you be the one to put a stumbling block in their path.

No one took sin and its deadly consequences more seriously than Jesus. And if we took it half as seriously as he did, we would understand why he said, "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 never dies, and the fire is never quenched."

**Another reason we find Jesus' words difficult to accept is because we misunderstand what hell is.**

Now somehow we get this idea that God delights in throwing sinners into hell and torturing them forever. But what possible joy could God get from that, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father? And if that's the view we have of God then we need to jettison it. Jesus comparing hell with the city garbage dump actually gives us another way to think about hell. Week by week we know it's necessary to throw out the garbage in our homes and have it taken away to be burned or buried. If someone never throws anything out their house becomes filthy and unpleasant; indeed you can't think of them without thinking of the garbage. And the same thing can happen with the junk in our lives called sin. You see, there is garbage in all our lives, and in the world, even in the lives of good people. And if we don't throw it out regularly, it will pile up and begin to stink. Our lives will begin to take on a foul odour.

And in his striking image Jesus says that God has provided a garbage dump for our sins, a place where they are burned up, so that not even God will see them any longer. And God has provided a drop-off place for our junk. Jesus died outside the Jerusalem city wall, overlooking Gehenna. As he suffered on that old rugged cross Jesus could see the smoke rising from the city dump. And God invites us to drop off our garbage at the foot of the cross, just as often as we have to. If I can put it this way, Jesus is the divine garbage collector. The Apostles Creed tells us that Jesus descended to hell. There is some hint in Scripture that Jesus went in spirit and preached to those who were trapped in hell. Most significantly Jesus descended into hell with our sins. He separated us from our sin by taking them upon himself so that our sins will not separate us from God. Every time we confess our sins in repentance; every time we pray in sincerity "Forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," we handing over our junk to Christ. Again and again he descends to hell with it.

Look, hell is a place for our garbage, not a place for people. Hell is a place for our sin to be consumed so that we can enter God's Kingdom, cleansed and forgiven, looking like Jesus himself, wearing his righteous robes. Sin is very serious, but God really doesn't want us to cut off hands and feet or pluck out eyes. What joy would God get from seeing his children mutilate themselves? Instead, God has given us another way. He invites us to hand over all the garbage in our lives to Him. People who stubbornly insist on hanging on to their junk or trying to deal with it themselves are the only ones who wind up in hell. God certainly doesn't want that to happen to anyone, and strives mightily and at length to draw them to himself. We pray for all and hope for all and proclaim God's way to all who listen. But if someone finally rejects the way God graciously offers them, then God will God will respect that choice. Let me assure you that breaks God's heart. God wants

his children to have life with Him now and in His Kingdom forever. And in Jesus Christ he gives us the way for it to happen. Put all your trust in Christ, hand over all your junk to him. And in return receive God's free gift of abundant and eternal life.

**One more reason we find Jesus' words difficult to accept is that we can hardly grasp the depth of God's love for us.**

We get hung up thinking of the unquenchable fire of hell. But the Bible tells us that there is an even greater unquenchable fire, and that is the fire of God's love. God's love for his creation, for the people he created, for you and me, is like an unquenchable fire.

Just as there are fires deep in the earth which sometimes come to the surface as molten lava, deep in God there is a burning love, a love that is like an unquenchable fire. And that love once overflowed on earth in a Cross outside a city wall. God loves us so much that he allowed his only Son to go to the depths of hell for us, before he raised him to live forevermore at his right hand. There is nothing God desires more than to have all his children together in his family and in his house forever.

Truthfully, we can hardly grasp the height and breadth and depth of God's love for us, a love that will burn until all of God's purposes for his creation and his people are fulfilled at last. God loves you with a love that is like an unquenchable fire. And if you sometimes feel God disciplining you and warning you; if you sometimes sense God pressuring you to examine your life and throw out the junk, that's not the fires of hell burning you. No, it's the fire of God's unquenchable love forming you, shaping you, burning away that which is unworthy and making you more like Jesus. As the hymn puts it, "The flame shall not hurt you, I only design your dross to consume, and your gold to refine." Yes, we may find Jesus' words difficult, but remember this. They come from a love deeper than we can grasp. They come from the unquenchable fire of God's love.