

September 30, 2018 –Baptisms of Tristan John Fitzgerald and Raymond Paschal Hublar  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Mark 9:38-48

### **What the --- ?!**

If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off, better that than to go to hell. If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off, better that than to go to hell. If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out, better that than to go to hell, where their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched. The gospel of the Lord. The gospel of the Lord?! What a reading for the day your baby is baptized!

Even the most literalist interpreters of scripture do not read these verses literally, as no one should. Christian faith does not advocate self-mutilation. Still, Christ does say these things. Repeatedly. Intentionally. So we may be excused for asking, What the h\*!! is Jesus talking about?

Well, he wasn't talking about a subterranean place presided over by a guy with a pitchfork and a pointed tail. Those cartoon images of hell, the whole concept of a three tiered universe with harp players in the clouds and a furnace underground, that's not what Jesus was talking about. We flatten faith when we talk about it like that. In fact, in these hell-and-brimstone admonishments, Jesus doesn't even use the word "hell," as the footnote in any good study Bible will tell you. What our translation renders "hell" is actually a geographical term, the word Gehenna.

You may not know what or where Gehenna is, but Jesus' first listeners did. Gehenna was a dump. Gehenna was the dump, an area, a depression—how fitting that geographical term is here—Gehenna was a depression, a valley outside of town where everyone offloaded their trash. Gehenna was the place where garbage was tossed and burned. That's what you do when you live in a place without sanitation services, you burn your trash. When my husband and I lived in rural Tanzania that's what we did; that's what everyone did. It always felt wrong, environmentally awful, upturning the trash bin into a vast, open-to-the-air pit. And then it would be lit. Or, as sometimes happens with accumulated waste, the chemical reactions of congested garbage might cause it to self-ignite spontaneously. That can happen with trash, too. Sometimes trash starts on fire, all on its own. I want you to hear what I'm saying, and hear me speaking more than literally. Hear Gehenna and think about all that we waste, all that we trash and torch, or watch self-ignite. We create towering, rotting piles of it, and we watch, as it turns into sludge, as we inhale its toxic exhaust.

That's the hell of that is Gehenna, a scorched earth, and a scorched humanity. Jesus' listeners knew where and what Gehenna was: it was the valley where Israel's ancient kings, terrible kings, the kind of kings God warned Israel against but they said, no we want one, Gehenna was the place where people who thought they were great burned things deemed worthless, while people watched. Gehenna was the place where they practiced child sacrifice.

Better to be missing a leg than to go there. Better to lose an eye than see that. Better to be missing an arm than exist in a society that holds life so cheaply, a world in which everything and anyone is expendable, bound for the incinerator if not already burning on its own.

This world can feel like that, like Gehenna: the dumpster fire of our current politics, the consuming flames of addiction or mental illness, your smoldering work situation, that charred relationship, the extinguishing of one's health, or mobility, or more. We know the valley of the

shadow of death. We know dumping grounds where the city services do not reach. We know the barrage of bad news, the self-ignition as it accumulates, the billowing smoke and choking stench, all that we waste, and then watch, as it become ash and fume. Would you not give your right arm to be free of that?

Jesus would. Jesus does. Jesus gives his right arm, and his left. Jesus gives his whole body, that we might be free of that. In Jesus God knows, lives, in the places of human destruction, among all that we discard. In Jesus God enters our three dimensional world as a three dimensional being. In Jesus God walks through the valley. In Jesus God experiences hell. And in Jesus, God tell us, with words that will and must grab our attention, “That’s not where you are bound. That’s not the world for which you were created. That’s not how you are to be.” That is what Jesus is saying, when he talks about hell.

I want you to think of a different image now. This day of a double baptism, I want you to have another picture in your mind, the picture Jesus’ first listeners would have had when they heard him speak with such passion against stumbling. This picture is very clear if you know where today’s verses occur in Mark’s gospel, if you know the verses immediately prior to then. We heard them last week, Bristol’s Children’s sermon was about them: the stickers she gave the children that that said, “Welcome Me!” And this picture is very clear today, and every day, if you stand in our church and look up at the balcony window. I think it’s probably the most beautiful part of our sanctuary, that window that depicts Jesus welcoming children.

I want you to think of that picture, that image, when you hear today’s gospel, because that’s the picture Jesus’ first listeners would have had. That’s what would have seen, it couldn’t be more literal for them than that, because just before these admonishments Jesus explained to his disciples what greatness is. Jesus explained true greatness, the rule and reign of God, with an image. He pointed to a child and then picked the child up, held the child in his lap. “This is what you do,” Jesus said, while holding the child. And then Jesus continued to hold the child as he continued speaking, the verses we heard today. They follow directly after last week’s, it’s a continuous passage. We’ve made it into two sections but there’s no indication in the text that the child was put down. Instead, in the text there is an indication the child is still there, still being held by Jesus, because Jesus refers to it. Jesus refers to the child when he begins these cautions against stumbling. Jesus says, “If anyone of you puts 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...”

Jesus is still holding the child as he warns us, tells us, who we are, how we are to be. Jesus is still holding the child, a powerful, visual reminder of what is at stake, what greatness is, what God is like, and what we may be like, too. Jesus is still holding the child. The text never tells us when he put the child down. For all we know he is still holding the child. The meaning of that is more than literal. Amidst fire and destruction and decay, Jesus is still holding the child. still holding us, welcoming us, blessing us, calling us his children, calling us beloved, calling us to be his body in this world.