

Text: Mark 9: 38-50  
Title: Mikros, Millstones and Maiming Metaphors  
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I've been to hell ~ twice.

In southeastern Michigan there is a little town of just over 250 people ~ Hell, Michigan. It has bar, a general store, and an ice cream parlor. There is a small wedding chapel just in case you want to get married in Hell. And, on January 24, 2004 the creek that runs through Hell froze over for the first time. I've been to Hell because of running races and bike rides. I ran and rode through Hell.

During my recent trip to Israel I saw hell for the second time. The word translated in our text as hell in Greek is *Gehenna* and it refers to a valley just outside of old Jerusalem.

The journey from Galilee to Jerusalem is through hilly-hard-scramble-scrub-brush-desert but you are also climbing in elevation. Jerusalem is a city set on a hill and at some places the pitch away from the old city walls is quite steep. One of valleys that falls away from city is the Valley of Hinnom ~ which is rendered in Greek as *Gehenna*. In the Old Testament that valley was known for Baal worship and the sacrifice of children to the god Molech. Later it became the town rubbish dump ~ where the bodies of criminals and dead animals were thrown into a smoldering stinking fire that slowly and continuously burned. In Judeo-Christian thought it was associated with the eschatological fires of hell. The prophet Jeremiah says of *Gehenna*:

*The days are coming, declares the Lord, when people will no longer call it the Valley of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury the dead until there is no more room. Then the carcasses of this people will become food for the birds and the wild animals, and there will be no one to frighten them away. I will bring an end to the sound of joy and to the voices of the bride and the bridegroom in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem, for the land will become desolate.*

It makes you shudder.  
It makes you turn away.  
It makes the laughter stop.  
It brings a tasteful worship service to an awkward halt.  
It makes you wonder why Jesus would threaten such a wretched place.  
It makes you wonder what such a hard harsh statement has to do with us.

What if we come at it this way?

The Gospel of Mark reaches a confessional crescendo in the eighth chapter when Jesus asks his disciples who they think he is and Peter responds, "You are the Messiah." From that point forward the gospel charts a path toward Jerusalem and the cross. Jesus begins talk about suffering, rejection, death, and resurrection....

And, he repeats this prediction.

And, he begins to call his disciples to a similar journey.

And, he begins to define discipleship as taking up a cross and following.

And, he begins to turn their understanding of creation on its head.

Because according to Jesus the last will be first,

the servant will be the greatest,

and that those who welcome the least and the littlest welcome God.

Jesus begins to reform their vision of the world through the shape of the cross.

But, his disciples are stumped, baffled, and a bit dull. They clearly don't get it. And, who can blame them? Their sense of things is being upended. And so, they keep asking the "wrong" questions.

*How come we couldn't drive the demon out of that boy?*

*Who is the greatest?*

*What about that guy who is not one of us but was driving out demons?*

Until Jesus, maybe with a sense of weariness to his voice, says:

*Look, that's not what matters. That's not the way things are...*

*It's not about who's first. It's not about who gets the glory. It's not about making sure that someone is on our team. It's not about religion.*

*It is about a different way of being, a different life, a life abundant.*

*It is about the way of God, the way of the kingdom....*

And, maybe as the incredulity of it comes crashing down, his voice rises, until with a measure of frustration he blurts out:

*Look, if anyone causes these little ones.... the last, the least...*

*If anyone causes them to stumble and struggle there will be hell to pay.*

*And what about you.....don't you get it? You are called to a different way in this world.*

*You were called to a way of life not the way of death. And whatever leads to sin leads to death.... So, cut it off! Get rid of it! Especially if it hurts others! It is a dead end.*

*It would be better for you to break off whatever it is that breaks you than to be tossed out into Gehenna...*

Dear friends, can we read this text as part of defining what it means to follow Jesus?

Can we read it as part of the shaping of a cruciform community?

Can we read it as part of the reframing of creation?

Now there is substantial debate about this text:

Are the *mikros* ~ the little ones ~ children or those young in belief?

When Jesus references *Gehenna* does he mean the unquenchable fire of damnation?

Does the litany of hand, eye, and foot with regard to the little ones have to do with the sexual abuse of children?

Are these saying unique to Jesus or was he reformatting colloquialisms?

I would encourage you to hear it as part of the call to being a peculiar people ~ those called out to follow the way of Christ. And, in that call there is the recognition that sin is a deadening and damning thing that diminishes who we are and it is not to be toyed with or shrugged off as incidental.

In a world that would tempt and trash,  
in a culture that would choke and cheapen,  
at a time when it can seem like we're swimming in a sewer....  
it is a call to seek after a different kingdom.

When I was a senior at a fine liberal arts college in the northwest corner of Iowa somebody had a cassette tape about the destructive forces of rock and roll. The taped preacher from Oklahoma was concerned in particular with the corrosive effects of back-masking ~ the belief that musicians had embedded music with subliminal messages from Satan, which could only be heard if you played the record backward.

You can imagine the late night drama in dimly lit dorm rooms as students would spin their turntables backwards and listen for the haunting and garbled voice of Satan. Soon impressionable and earnest kids, short on sleep and worried about their soul's eternal destiny, began a frenzy of record breaking and burning. They wanted to purge their lives of sin and protect their souls. They wanted to be pleasing to God. It was better to live in Iowa without rock and roll than suffer the eternal screams of hell....

I remember standing out by the dumpster asking if I could look through what they were throwing out. There was no need to let a good Eagles, America, Billy Joel, or Earth Wind and Fire albums go to waste over the worry that Satan might worm his way in to wrench you free from the grip of God.

Some scholars read this text with that sensibility. William Hendriksen:

*Temptation should be flung aside immediately and decisively. Dillydallying is deadly. Halfway measures work havoc. The surgery must be radical. Right at this very moment and without any vacillation the obscene book should be burned, the scandalous picture destroyed, the soul-destroying film condemned, the sinister yet very intimate social tie broken, and the baneful habit discarded. In the struggle against sin the believer must fight hard. Shadow-boxing will never do.*

I don't mean to diminish the power of books, music, and film. So, if it is helpful, don't lob off your hand or gouge out your eye, but make sure that you scour your shelves and clean out your hard drive.....But, what if in that simplistic and privatized reading we lose track of that which is more subtle, more pervasive, more deadening...

In a culture of consumption ~ keep your distance.

In an age of vile, ugly rhetoric ~ speak differently and don't support those who profit from it.

In a world of revenge ~ practice forgiveness.

In a spirit of cynical retreat ~ trust in love, hope in mercy.

In an era of exclusivity ~ include the other, the outsider, and the one on the margins.

It's better for you to be poor than to sell your soul for all riches of the world  
It's better for you to be bruised than to trample the weak.  
It's better for you to be slow than to gobble up the earth for the sake of speed.

I don't know what to make of Jesus reference or threat of *Gehenna*.  
It is Jesus at his exaggerated hyperbolic best. And yet...

All of us, no matter how pious or pure, stumbles and at times cause others to stumble.  
And, if we were to chop off the organs that lead to sin we would be deaf, blind, mute,  
lame and bloodied stumps. And, if we really wanted to start cutting at where it starts we  
could start with the heart, or the mind, or the will...

I saw a man who was facing the end of his life. He asked for it straight and the doctors gave him  
a short time frame. He usually wore his heart on his sleeve and words would just tumble out  
without any filter. But, on this day he was stunned, sobered, and soft spoken.

He was thinking about a bucket list ~ those things that he still wanted to do.

He was thinking about family and loves and losses.

He was thinking about God.

He said:

*I think I'm straight with the man upstairs. I've got my own way with him. But, you do  
start to wonder if you did it right.... I remember that I really needed to hear grace when I  
was going to church. I know that I need grace now....*

Ronald Goetz put it this way:

*It is ironic that the one who ended up mutilated for sin was Jesus himself. He who said  
cut off your hand and foot was hanged hand and foot from the cross. He who advised  
plucking out your eye shut both his eyes unto death. Perhaps Jesus has earned the right  
to discuss with us the gravity of our sin, having forgiven us our sin in such mutilating  
agony. Perhaps his forgiveness of us might evoke in us, if only for a moment, a  
willingness to wonder about the pride we take in our modernity, our self-sufficiency, our  
self-justification. Perhaps we do stand in need of grace. Could it be that if Jesus' cross is  
any indication, the only real grace is costly, hard-earned grace? Maybe we, even we,  
need as a mercy to hear of the awe-full judgment of God for a time. And thereby to be  
brought to our senses about the significance of our lives and deaths.*

Dear friends even on the edges of *Gehenna* may we be shaped by cross.  
And may that grace reform us to a different way of being.  
Amen.