

Boundaries

Texts: **Mark 9: 38-50; James 5: 13-20**; from *Ubuntu*, by Desmond Tutu

"I'm a Christian, but not that kind of Christian." I hate that I feel I have to say this, but sometimes I do. Usually it's right after someone has said something like: "Christians are horrible people. They deny science and biology and evolution. They claim to follow the God of love, but they hate gays, immigrants and racial justice. They only care about babies before birth, but are against any programs to help children after they are born. They condemn sexual misbehavior in others, but cover up sexual misbehavior in their own clergy. They are horrible hypocrites."

I wish that I could deny that those charges were true. I wish I could simply say that those people aren't Christians - not real Christians anyway - and write them off, but I can't do that. They are baptized. They proclaim faith in Christ. They go to church. They read their Bible. They claim the name of Christian, just as I do. It would be too easy for me to let myself off the hook for the behavior of my fellow Christians, simply by saying that they aren't real Christians. It would be an abdication of responsibility if I were to wash my hands of them.

I think they are completely wrong on these issues, that they are unbiblical and that they are not acting like Christians at all, but I can't deny that they are somehow attached to me through the Christian faith. That's why it's important that I speak up against hypocrisy, hate, anti-science, and the temptation to try to control others in the name of Christ. The public face of Christianity is on the line, and too often that public face is one that is all about rejection, anger, fear, and control. But if Christians who are loving, kind, accepting, open, science-minded, and who read the Bible non-literally don't speak up, these other Christians will drive people away from the faith forever. We can see it in the polling about Christians supporting children in cages, or controlling women's bodies, or opposing racial justice. The part of the church doing that is driving people away from Jesus.

As Jesus sat in a house in Capernaum with a child in his arms, he had some very harsh words for people who put a stumbling block in front of little ones who believe in him. They are some of his very harshest words for anyone, and they startle us when we hear them. We heard them this morning: "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 to go to hell."

These are strong words, troubling words. We do not expect these words from Jesus, but perhaps we should. He is always about protecting the innocent, about defending the weak, about accepting the

outcasts. We don't have to think long before we realize that the clergy abuse of children, so long kept secret and covered up, is the very sort of thing Jesus is talking about here. We cannot say that Jesus didn't take it seriously. We cannot say that Jesus had no concern about the children. As a child sat in his arms, he decried those who would harm a child's faith through their misbehavior. Jesus warned those who would harm children of the very great consequences of their actions. Jesus protested against Christians who would put stumbling blocks in front of others, to keep them from faith in him.

Scholars connect Jesus' initial words about children to the warnings that come later, that is to the amputations of hand or foot or the removal of an eye. Now, we know not to take these images literally. They are difficult enough for us to hear without the lurid depictions of the flames of hell that medieval art conjures up. Talking about cutting off hands or feet or eyes were well known metaphors in the ancient world for a rejection of wrong-doing. Jesus is drawing on familiar images for people to highlight the seriousness of what he is saying. For example, most people would have known the story of Oedipus, the legendary Greek king who unwittingly had children with his own mother, and gouged out his own eyes so that he would not have to look on his crime against nature. Here Jesus is saying just remove one eye, already a step-down from the familiar image.

Indeed, we ought to take these body images in the context of that other ancient allegory, that of the church itself as a body. Paul uses this image several times in his letters, saying that it's good that not everyone in the church is the same, that not everyone is an eye or a foot. Here we can understand the image of amputating a hand or a foot or an eye as being an ejection of wrong-doers from the church assembly, of cutting off some people to save the whole body of believers, at least until the offending people repent.

This is where Jesus is against the cover-up, against staying quiet to protect the reputation of the church, or its unity. When people say and do horrible, hateful, wrong things that drive others away from following Jesus, the rest of the church has to stand up and say, "We are not Christians like that. That is not what the way of Christ is. We separate ourselves from that hate and willful ignorance."

Sometimes the church is the worst enemy of Christ. I cannot tell you how many times people have come to me after weddings or baptisms or funerals to tell me how they used to go to church, until the church did something that turned them away. So many people have stories about being rejected by church long before they rejected church themselves. They are the little ones who had faith in Jesus until someone put up a stumbling block. One man told me about how his church refused to celebrate his marriage to a woman of a different race because they said it was wrong. Another person told me that his church refused to baptize his child because the child was conceived out of wedlock. I know a couple who were coming to church, growing in faith, finding strength for life in the truth of the gospel who ended up leaving church all together. The denomination of which they were a part condemned homosexuality and refused to accept same-sex marriage when it came to Canada. They said to me, "We have so many gay friends and we just can't be associated with an institution that condemns them or their full humanity." And so they left. How terrible it is for those who put up stumbling blocks. I've had Democrats tell me that they didn't think they were welcome in Christian churches because they were Democrats, and I know many LGBTQ people who have been told that they weren't welcome because of who they are.

Jesus has very harsh words for those who drive others away from the faith like this. They are some of the strongest words he ever used. We shouldn't imagine that his talk of hell is literal here, meaning eternal torment in flames. But we should know that Jesus intends us to take his warnings very seriously. One reason we know that we shouldn't read these words literally, besides their being well known images from the ancient world, is that Jesus adds that weird phrase at the end of his speech, that "everyone will be salted with fire." He keeps us from imagining that we are always the ones pointing the finger at others who have driven people away from the church, and that we are not sometimes the ones who have done it as well.

With that phrase - "that everyone will be salted with fire" - Jesus takes the image of fire out of the realm of punishment and puts it where God puts it, into the realm of purification and redemption. Fire works to take impurities out of metals, to get rid of the dross and to keep what was good and valuable. And salt was well known for preserving food and keeping it from going bad. These are the goals Jesus has, purification and preservation, when he uses his dramatic talk of cutting off parts of the body that are doing harm to others, or even to the body itself. Purify the body of Christ, the church, but then use the salt of repentance to preserve it from going bad entirely. Don't let the church lose its saltiness by failing to repent of the ways that it can keep people from Christ itself, even while speaking out against the ways others do it.

Jesus' difficult words here emphasize that it's important for all of us to speak up when we see other Christians doing unjust, unchristian, and unloving things. It's important for us to say, they are Christians, but they are not acting in the way that Christ would have us act. It's important to be bold and say, I'm a Christian, but I'm not that kind of Christian. I'm the kind of Christian that flies a rainbow flag. I'm the kind of Christian that welcomes refugees. I'm the kind of Christian who sees the full humanity in people of every race. I'm the kind of Christian who thinks that science is a gift of God. It's important to say, I'm the kind of Christian who will report other Christians to the police if they are abusing children, or their wives, or the weak. The love of Christ compels me to protect those in trouble, even if it looks bad for the church, because not doing so will look worse for the church, and worse for Christ.

Jesus himself empowers us to speak up and speak out about anything that is driving others away from belief in him. He wasn't afraid to use very strong language to insist on the church being a place where people who want to put their faith in him can be welcomed and not driven away.

Sometimes, as painful as it is, we must speak up and say, "I'm a Christian, but I'm not that kind of Christian. This church is a place for all followers of Jesus, and you are welcome here."