

Come to Jesus Meeting

“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, 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 to 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 to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.” From Mark 9

In this Sunday’s Gospel, seen above, I believe we get to witness the original “Come to Jesus” meeting from Jesus himself!

For weeks Jesus has been traveling with his closest disciples and teaching and demonstrating the radical nature of God’s kingdom, but they are still far from understanding the true meaning of Jesus’ words and deeds. Time after time they get caught up in their own agenda. Despite Jesus’ words and actions to the contrary, they are still drawing lines that seek to exclude; they insist on setting boundaries, establishing status, and deciding who is in and who is out. This week, they try to stop a man from healing in Jesus’ name “because he was not following us.” We can almost imagine Jesus shaking his head in frustration that they just don’t get it. And then in no uncertain terms, using very vivid and descriptive language that we see above, Jesus gives them his list of rules, or more to the point, actions that are not acceptable for members of his community. He says in effect: Even someone who just gives a thirsty person a cup of water in my name pleases God. On the other hand, if you give even one of these new believers a hard time, or come between them and God because of your arrogance, you will create an absolute scandal. You would be better off dropped in a deep lake with a cement block tied around your neck than to deal with me if any of you ever do such a thing.” At this point we can almost see the disciples dropping their heads and trying to look anywhere except right at Jesus. Then in what is still very incendiary language, he uses the metaphor of the Body and says, “If there is some part of you that is rotten inside that gets in the way of showing God’s love to the world, chop it off or cut it out. I promise you; you would be better off feeling raw and vulnerable in God’s kingdom than being the proud owner of a hardened heart or dark eye that misses the love of God.” Jesus is saying, “Please do not persist in actions that do not reflect God’s mercy. As my disciples, if you fail to realize what I am doing, you might as well spend your life living in a maggot-infested spiritual garbage dump with the stench of burning rot your only companion. (Gehenna, the word translated as “hell” refers to the dump just outside the walls of the city. It was a horrible place.) Jesus wants them to understand that they are making choices that are counter to his very purpose. Jesus speaks such difficult words to the very ones he has chosen as his community because once we say we follow Jesus, our choices in this life matter; they take on deeper consequences. It’s not anger or judgment driving Jesus’ harshness, but unspeakable love. Jesus is pleading, not condemning. He calls us to open ourselves wide even when we don’t understand or are afraid. Jesus knows that false divisions don’t add anything to life, they keep us in a state of spiritual death. Jesus has come to a world where people don’t really want to see the broken, the oppressed, or those on the margins. We feel safer when we can live in clearly defined borders that allow us to maintain our pride of place. One reason for this may well be that many of us do not even know that we are suffering this blindness. The modern term for this is “implicit bias.” Implicit bias (see link below) refers to unconscious behaviors of prejudice that create a whole world of injustice. It is when we enact ingrained social and cultural acts of bigotry that degrade people of different ethnicities, religions, sexualities, genders, etc. When we suffer from implicit bias we have no idea how destructive our behavior is or even how our fear of a borderless world makes it impossible to heed Jesus’ call to bring down the systemic barriers of race, creed, color, gender. And we’ll never

awaken unless we allow ourselves to think or feel differently, until we allow God to get past our hard-fought walls of separation. In Mark's gospel, Jesus' earthly ministry opens with the dramatic tearing open of the heavens. It concludes with a ripping apart of the temple curtain. The barriers that separate us from God are torn away. This dramatic imagery and Jesus' need to speak so abrasively to us is our coming Gospel. Jesus' seemingly harsh words of amputation offers not violence, but forgiveness, healing, and release. Jesus begs us to do radical surgery on ourselves to root out those places where hate lies hidden; where fear drives divisions. A "Come to Jesus meeting" is never easy but thank God for the love of Christ that cares enough to speak the sometimes-difficult words that demand that we make a life that can give life to others. Jesus needs us to make the choices and decisions that will call all of God's children in---into the very heart of God's grace, mercy and love.

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+