

Jesus has some harsh teachings in this scripture passage from the Gospel of Mark. He launches into these extreme metaphors of what it would be like for a person if they were to cause another to sin. Sinking to the bottom of the sea with the weight of a millstone around one's neck; chopping off the hands or feet; plucking out an eye. . . Causing another to commit crimes against the spirit has some very significant costs to the body of the community!

And as Jesus is saying all these things to the disciples while continuing to elevate a child among them. You might remember from last Sunday in the passage before this one, Jesus reaches out for a child and places the child amongst the disciples to teach a lesson that overturns conventional or societal wisdom on what greatness really is.

When Jesus places the child amongst the disciples, he says, "Whoever wants to be first must be least of all and servant of all." And he says this to counteract the values that are tugging at the disciples. The competition for wealth, power, and prestige is simply not a value of God's Kingdom and this is what makes Jesus's passion so difficult for them and for us to understand.

What some of the biblical commentaries tell us about the text before us today is that Jesus has not put the child down from last week because the disciples still don't get it. The child figure is very much among them in the way this conversation turns from the question of "Who is the greatest?" to "Who is in and who is out?" in terms of God's kingdom work.

Again, these questions are more about human thoughts than divine thoughts and so Jesus continues this conversation about taking care of the vulnerable, renouncing your own desire for advancement or dominance – and what Jesus gives us instead is a kingdom ethic of humility in the way we interact with one another.

There's a lot going on in this text even before we get to this text.

And it opens with the disciple, John, making a judgement about people he has witnessed casting out demons in the name of Jesus. At this point in the Jesus narrative, we only have hints as to what the big picture lessons are through his life, death, and resurrection. And Jesus keeps on re-orienting our thoughts to God's thoughts.

Jesus confronts the disciples and us with our own biases and prompts us to consider the possibility that the power of God is available and accessible in ways well beyond our own human and limited Biblical imagination. The big question that comes from John's concern about those who are casting out demons in Jesus' name is: Why are we so interested in drawing lines as to who is in and who is out of God's Kingdom reign?

Jesus offers multiple responses to explain all that is wrong with John's attempts to censure the work of the exorcist, but there are two big cautionary points Jesus makes through his lesson on inclusion:

The first point is: Don't even try to limit what God is doing or the possibilities of what God can do.

And furthermore, the second point of caution is: Don't think your actions don't have consequences!

And we're not just talking about the consequences of our own actions, but when we are knit as a community, we need to understand the way in which the actions of others have consequences in the fabric of the greater community.

Our individual discipleship is not just about having a one-on-one relationship with Jesus. Who you are and how you follow Jesus has repercussions for the greater community, but do we actually give that much thought?

I know that many of the mature disciples amongst us in this place do take seriously into account their own individual actions especially when they engage in work or careers of public service. How we live out our lives in small ways has a great effect on others in our wider circles of influence, whether we realize it or not.

The spiritual power we receive from God is not purely meant for ourselves alone, but spiritual power is meant to be shared in order to build up the wider community into the kingdom vision God has for all creation.

And John's vision of what Jesus is doing in building the kingdom is so very limited at this point. John basically says, we tried to stop the good work the exorcist was doing because he was not following us.

This is really the problem with partisan politics, isn't it?

We can't come to a decision or compromise because giving in would mean that our team would not get the credit.

The disciples are the ones that want to be followed, but the exorcist of the demons is doing the work in the name of Jesus.

There is this very human phenomenon amongst followers of Jesus (and we even see it to this day) that when someone does not follow Jesus in a particular and prescriptive way, the person who is different or odd will be not only looked down upon, but be cast out of the faith community.

Whether it's progressives looking down on conservatives or vice versa; whether it's Protestants looking down on Catholics, as we get into these tribes and see what we think is going wrong, we compare their reality to our own aspirational values, but maybe we should do the opposite—compare a person's reality to what their own aspirations are.

Judgment is what this lesson from Jesus is all about. He is pointing to our human lack of judgement and the extremes of God's judgement in getting us to live out kingdom values now and to teach those kingdom values to the littlest ones amongst us.

We need to take seriously this message of what happens to those who cause a little one to stumble. Jesus is driving home a point about the way the most vulnerable in our society are treated. And if there ever was a national spotlight on the dynamics of the vulnerability of children and the consequences that come from childhood incidents, it is now. We see it most especially in the current Senate Confirmation Hearings for the one who may be the next Supreme Court Justice in the United States.

Judgement! Jesus might have something to say about this subject!

When we are confronted with the question of "Who's side are you on?" Perhaps it's not so much about aligning people with your side or my side, but it's about the critical examination of who really is on God's side! And Jesus does not hesitate to remind us again and again through his life and ministry that God is always on the side of the most vulnerable, particularly when it comes to children.

The alleged incident that is currently being examined in the life and character of Judge Brett Kavanaugh goes back to a time in which both Christine Blasey Ford and Brett Kavanaugh were mere children. She was 15 years old and he was 17 years old. And as a society, we are confronted with this grim reality that what happens to us as children and our actions as children both have profound effects on our own lives as well as on the lives of others even decades later!

Some may say that the allegations of a sexual assault from a childhood long ago are of little importance later in life. Many observers of the Senate Judiciary Hearings are led to ask: What's the big deal, anyway? If it did happen, it happened so long ago, so let it go.

But to the lives of these two individuals, this long forgotten and long remembered incident is a very big deal. Their recollections are a testament to their character today and how each of them will move forward into their future.

I have to believe that God sees the vulnerability of both Brett Kavanaugh and Christine Blasey Ford. As a teen, Kavanaugh was vulnerable to the societal expectations and peer pressures of machismo that include underage drinking and an obsession with athleticism. Christine Blasey Ford was vulnerable simply for being 15 years old and female.

And what Jesus steers us toward in our discipleship is to welcome the little ones in all their vulnerability, because to do otherwise is to invite and suffer the consequences of harsh judgement.

The judgement we have of these two individuals should cause us to judge our own personal values and actions as they pertain to the formation of our societal expectations. The entire apocalyptic scenario that Jesus paints for us in regard to what happens when we ignore in particular the vulnerabilities of children is a warning from Jesus should cause us to pay special attention to children and how they give us access to the presence of God.

This drama in the halls of the senate should really open our eyes to what it means for young people to mature into healthy adulthood in this day and age. It is also an indicator that we as a nation are coming of age with our values and our collective responsibilities toward one another.

It might be that as a nation and as a community of faith, we begin to seriously consider what the stumbling blocks are that cause the most vulnerable among us to stumble into sin. In this Senate confirmation situation we are confronted with the dark realities of systemic sin on many different levels. And though the stumbling blocks that cause the little ones to stumble and trip may be of various sizes and kinds, the common denominator of every stumbling block that causes a person to trip into sin is power.

And Jesus goes so far as to say that the abuse of power that becomes a stumbling block for the powerless will become a millstone around the neck of those who abuse their power. The consequences of power gone unchecked will cause the once powerful to sink within a river of fire where the burning is never quenched. And what makes this conversation important is that Supreme Court Judges make decisions about the very people that feel unsafe in our society.

When I reflect on the things that both Christine Blasey Ford and Brett Kavanaugh have said in Senate Judicial Hearings this week, I not only think of the many women around the world who have endured incidents of sexual violence, but I also think of the inadequate societal responses to it.

Ford testified that what terrified her the most about her encounter with Kavanaugh those many years ago when they were children, is that it was hard for her to breathe and she thought that Kavanaugh was accidentally going to kill her. And though Kavanaugh does not say this directly, it is clear in his mind that having his nose to the grindstone for all these years should not mean having a millstone hung around his neck today.

But we have reached a tipping point in our society in which there really is no good excuse for unwanted sexual aggression against anybody. And it's no longer acceptable to say, "boys will be boys," and "girls will be girls."

Our message as the church and followers of Jesus is that these little ones in our midst will be responsibly and ethically empowered to maintain not only their own human dignity, but the human dignity of others.

Jesus tells us that everyone will be salted with fire. No one is exempt. And this means that each and everyone of us will be vulnerable to personal indignities at some point in our own lives, but it is our community that restores the true function of salt.

To be salted with fire means to be going through a process of purification. It means that what is not necessary or good is burned away, and what remains is a treasure. And then to maintain salt within community is to be full of the flavor of God's love which thereby fosters peace.

So church, maintain salt among yourselves through God's love and keep peace with each other, because all of our actions do have consequences. May we also have the grace to trust in the unlimited power of God's unbounding mercy and love to overcome all things that would lead us astray. Let it be so.

Amen.