

Mark 9:38-50

John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

"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.

"For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

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In August, I was invited to train to be a trainer with the College for Congregational Development, it's a churchwide network that focuses on education in and for the parish, with ways of making congregations generally more effective, more healthy, and more faithful. I spent 8 long days in Georgia, working with a group of people I'd never met, teaching unfamiliar material, in a cultural

context that was completely new to me. The experience stretched me in many ways. Every night, when the trainers gathered to debrief the day, we circled up for a session of Appreciative Feedback. Of all the new experiences and unfamiliar situations I found myself in that week, this ranked as one of the most challenging.

When I was first introduced to Appreciative Feedback the whole idea of it gave me full-body cringe. I hadn't quite understood what we were being asked to do, and I thought I needed to come up with something flattering, say something complimentary to each of my co-trainers. This didn't strike me as a debrief, it felt like a sugar-coating, like positive spin, I wondered if it might even be dishonest.

I was shaped by a culture that places very high value on being honest, brutally honest if necessary. It's seen almost as a duty. I was raised to observe the world around me, assess it and be ready to give it honest feedback, usually about how it could all be so much better if only...

So appreciative feedback left me a bit cold, I worried it might just be too much of a cultural leap for me to get comfortable with.

Turns out I'd got it quite wrong.

Appreciative feedback is actually kinda powerful.

It's the process of identifying a specific positive behavior, noticing it, and then commenting on it by giving it meaning. I'll share an example: on the day after I arrived, my mentor left some tea for me on the table where I was working. I was up to my gills preparing for the sessions I was going to teach the next day, and I was feeling completely out of my element, and, honestly, also a

bit lonely. I really appreciated that cup of tea. When I offered this as feedback, I became more aware of the impact it had: that simple gesture had made me feel seen and a little included and that gave me just a bit more confidence for what was coming. *Noticing that* actually changed the quality of my experience, it impacted how I felt and it actually influenced how I then behaved.

Over the course of our 8 days together I started to perceive my colleagues in a different light. This practice of appreciative feedback had changed what I came to notice during the day, appreciating, and being changed by, the dozens of small, yet deeply meaningful interactions I had with the people I was surrounded by.

The cultural “honesty” I had always assumed was a strength, I realized was actually a cover for self-righteousness. I was formed to hold well-thought out opinions, hold them and defend them, justify them - and to share them, if and when necessary. Certain of being right, of upholding certain values and moral judgements, I was formed to see it as my responsibility to point out when things were ‘off-track’ or going wrong. I was trained, actually, to be self-righteous.

And I don’t think I’m the only one who got that training!

It took being asked to intentionally experience the folks around me *appreciatively* for me to see just how life-giving the actions and behaviors of those around me are, so much of the rich goodness was passing me by, moment-to-moment, unnoticed. Because I wasn’t practiced at noticing it. It’s always been “my job” to notice what’s wrong.

My enculturated self-righteousness had me mired in the imperfections, judgements, the critiques of others.

What if habits of perception like this, habits of noticing, self-righteousness and other negative biases, trap us in a type of hell. Granted, it's not quite the dramatic fury of unquenchable hellfire that Jesus offers us in today's Gospel reading, but perhaps Jesus is deploying some dramatic language here so that we will sit up and take notice.

What more enduring a hell can the self-righteous know than the one co-created here on earth as the fruit of self-righteous indignation? And what possible stumbling block could be more effective at keeping our neighbor from knowing fullness of life than the self-doubt, or anxiety, or anger – all common responses to the ever-flowing river of judgement and critique that pours from the countless millions of us who're well practiced in self-righteousness?

It is undeniable that we live in a world in which there is great suffering, people and planet are suffering: there is war and natural disaster; here and around the world societal injustices pile on top of folks leaving so many in the midst of unrelenting violence, so many are unhoused, unfed, incarcerated – our world is far from utopian. And yet this needn't be hell ... because the fullness of God's presence is here, and the promise of our participation in the reality of God is our inheritance.

Our worldviews, our biases, are hard to shake, our long-held beliefs and opinions rarely fall away overnight, even with the most convincing of counter-argument. Too often, we are so convinced of our take on the world, of its accuracy, that we incorporate it into who we are. Our response to the world and

the people in it becomes almost an actual part of our physical self, part of our personality, part of our decision-making, and in this way it influences and creates both our present and our future.

Jesus is grabbing us all by the shoulders this morning with his words! He wants us to see how our habits of perception, of thought, of action combine to create the unrelenting hell we so often perceive, that we so often feel trapped in. He wants us to know that it all has consequence, every habit of thought, word, and action. And he's also pointing out just how hard it is to make the change that's needed for the just and peaceful world we yearn for; we will have to "cut away" part of who we've become.

But the good news in this teaching, the very good news, is that Jesus is also affirming just how great our power is to effect change –

Our habitual actions, however seemingly small and insignificant, will perpetuate a kind of living hell when they are the fruit of self-righteousness; and our actions, however seemingly small or insignificant will bring the kingdom to earth when they are the fruit of a heart and mind transformed as part of the living body of Christ.

Jesus is talking about a simple glass of water, a stumbling block, these are the small, barely noticed everyday things of life of each one of us. He is placing the power for change firmly and squarely on our shoulders. Jesus knew well the worldly power of Empire, the earthly power of Kings, and in the midst of that reality, then and now, he locates the power for heaven or hell in the very heart of our own lives, each of us – asking what we might need to lose, what part of ourselves, our habits of thinking and doing

that we've taken on as part of our identity, what part of this will we need to cut away to know freedom, to enter into life, that fullness of life that by which we each catch a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven, both already here and yet, not quite.

Our perception has the capacity to experience both hell and heaven, and our lives, together, have the power to create them.