**[Numbers 11: 24-29](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=221" \l "hebrew_oth_reading" \t "_blank)**

[**Psalm 19:7-14**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=221#psalm_oth_reading)

[**James 5:13-20**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=221#epistle_reading)

[**Mark 9:38-50**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=221#gospel_reading)

**THE PATH**

**SERMON FOR SEPTEMBER 30**

Our church has for some time now been following a path of worship that differs in very important respects from the paths followed by most other of our fellow churches. To put it in a nutshell, we contend that the love of God is unconditional in that it does not come with conditions attached, that it is relentless in that it never ceases doing its work on and for every single human being, and that it is victorious, in that it will in the end bring every single human being into full membership within God's own family.

Or to put it another way, we base our ministry on the truth Paul expresses in his first letter to the Corinthians(15:28), where he writes of the end of all things, of the time:

*When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.*

“All things,” in our view, means all things, everyone, every single human being.

When you begin with that fundamental belief, then certain things follow from it. One is that there could not be and therefore is no such things as eternal damnation, eternal separation from God, and therefore that these is no such place as a prison for those who are eternally damned. Or in other words, there is no hell, as people commonly understand it.

When we begin with that basic thought, it opens up the possibility of a much deeper and richer exploration of the New Testament, and especially of the sayings recorded of our Lord. For although Jesus certainly does often speak of a kind of very serious separation between people, of paths that lead in opposing directions; once we reject the thought that He is talking about a permanent separation between the damned and the saved, once we refuse the thought that one path leads to eternal torture, then we are led to think about what the nature of the separation really is that Jesus is teaching us about.

In our Gospel reading for this morning, Jesus offers some very striking imagery to express the importance of taking one path rather than the other. Let's read it together and you'll see what I'm referring to.

Read Mark 9: 38:50

Do you see what I mean by striking imagery? Being tossed overboard with a giant stone around your neck, having a hand chopped off and an eye gouged out, worms that never die and gnaw on people forever? The images are in fact so powerful and so arresting and so gruesome that many are intimidated by them, even taking them to support the idea that Jesus is talking literally about some actual place of unthinkable torture by unending fire and worms with an eternal lifespan.

But quite obviously he's using figurative language here to make a point vividly, and virtually no one except a tragically misguided few would ever take them literally. If we took them literally, the world would be full of one-handed and one-eyed Christians, because I've yet to meet even one who hasn't succumbed at least a time or two to the various moral infractions symbolized by the hand and the eye: greed, lust and so on.

But if we all agree that Jesus is speaking figuratively and for rhetorical effect when he's talking about cutting off hands and gouging out eyes, why would we insist that he be talking literally about some surreal place of insanely gruesome and never-ending torture?

No, the much more persuasive interpretation is that Jesus is speaking in a highly colorful way in order to make a lasting impression on those who hear his words. If he had simply said: “It's very important that you follow the way of life I'm recommending to you,” although that would have been speaking truly, it is very unlikely that it would have registered very strongly in the minds of those who were being trained to carry His message out into the world.

And the reason He seeks so firmly and dramatically to make that impression on their minds and imaginations is that, although He is not literally ordering them to cut off their hands and pluck out their eyes, anymore than he is literally threatening them with eternal torture if they don't, he is saying that the instruction that he's giving them is the most important instruction they will ever hear. While he is not saying that one path leads to damnation being gnawed at eternally by worms, he is saying that the path of righteousness is the true, God-ordained path, and therefore preferable to any other, no matter how alluring the potential rewards they might offer. He is saying that any other choice than the one to follow Him will be paths of spiritual disappointment and frustration.

And if we're in agreement about that, then we are now liberated to begin to think about the nature of this path or choice that Jesus puts so much emphasis on, to the extent of claiming that following that path is the single most important thing in life. What is that path? And what is Jesus telling us about it in our reading for today?

So let’s look at it a little more carefully.

The whole passage begins with a question from one of the disciples:

*John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."*

And Jesus responds:

*9:39 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. 9:40 Whoever is not against us is for us.*

Now if you try to make everyday ordinary sense out of this exchange, you immediately run into difficulties. The disciple, after all, is asking about somebody who is at the very least pretending to be a follower of Jesus, and yet Jesus gives an answer that appears to have little to do with the question. He first makes a very dubious observation about human nature, about being unable to speak ill of someone you pretend to admire or imitate. But immediately we start thinking of counter-examples. Peter, after all, Jesus's own greatest follower who had done many miracles in his name, ended up by denying him three times. You don’t have to look very far, in your own life and the lives of those you know, to find many examples of disloyalty and ingratitude.

And then Jesus goes even farther out on a limb, by offering a conclusion that seems at best, overly optimistic, and at worst simply false. “Whoever is not against us is for us.” But can't you be neutral, or unconvinced, or from Missouri, so you’ll have to show me?

Clearly here, as always, Jesus is using simple words to say something beyond their literal, common sense application, something very deep, something that speaks of heavenly rather than worldly things.

I think the key to our spiritual understanding comes in the next thing Jesus says, which once again seems almost unrelated to the original question and to the first answer Jesus himself just gave. He says:

*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.*

He says, in a simple image, that the very smallest thing you do in following Him is important.

If we put this in terms of our image of the path, I think what Jesus is saying is the exact same thing he then goes one to illustrate, from the opposite point of view, in the grisly imagery we've already discussed. He's saying that the path He wants us to follow is so important that any movement, no matter how small, in its direction, is to be encouraged. That flamboyant individual casting out demons, even if a charlatan, has begun to inch his way towards Christ. Whatever path that has not been deliberately chosen to head in the opposite direction from the path of Christ at least still has the potential of correcting its orientation, and that’s a good thing, that’s something that is not to be discouraged.

In other words, both the opening and the concluding verses of this selection emphasize the absolute priority and preeminence of directing our own life paths in the direction of the Way along which Christ offers to guide us. Both do so, but through different lessons, and each lesson, I think, has a different application for us.

The opening section teaches us that all of our lives are more or less astray, wandering more or less blind through the snares and pitfalls and seductions of the world, and none of us can find our way through one heroic effort, through magic or wishing to make it so. Real life is not a fairy tale. In real life, there are no magical solutions.

Bad things happen as well as good things. We all make mistakes every single day, and some of them are irreversible. Real life, the life we all actually lead, consists of one small step at a time, hour after hour, day after day, and what matters is that those steps, however small, over time begin to converge with the Way of Christ. When we stumble, that's okay, because we can always get back up. When we swerve from the path, that's okay, because we can still recover our orientation. Even in the darkest night, there is always that one point of light, the North Star, to give us our bearing.

That’s the real lesson of the outsider doing deeds in Christ’s name. Keep your focus on the hope rather than the condemnation, because hope always leads towards Christ, while condemnation always leads away from Christ.

And the frightening verses of warning, although they have a different sort of application, still help us to find a similar orientation for our own lives, because what they teach us is that our spiritual difficulties and failures derive, almost all of them, from our failure to follow the path upon which Christ offers to guide us. There are an infinite number and variety of perfect paths to our Father who art in heaven, and each of those paths was created in eternity for every one of us. My path is not yours, because I am not you. But we both have this in common, that we've strayed, some of us like myself have strayed very far indeed, from that perfect path. And whatever our material lives look like, the flaws and imperfections of our spirits all derive from the ways and occasions we have strayed from that unique path that God laid out for each of us, back in the dim beginnings of all things. That’s the bad news. But the good news is that we all have this other thing in common: that the original perfect path is still there, still drawing us towards it, and we all have the same guide back, and that guide loves us without condition, and He is relentless, and final victory most certainly belongs to Him.

His name is Jesus Christ.

And so for today, we'll close with a sermon prayer, Father, that you keep us in constant and ever-growing awareness of the importance of following Christ, that you open our eyes to the ways in which our lives have been diminished when we’ve strayed from following Him. But we pray also that you keep us in remembrance of the importance of even the smallest steps taken to return to that path. We know that we can't all be saints but we can all be just a little bit better than we were yesterday, and we know that's what matters to Jesus is the direction we're heading, not the point we've reached, because Jesus knows that, in the end, all our roads lead into the Kingdom of His love. That’s why we ask for these things in His name.