

The disciples' question of Jesus in today's reading reminds me of something the Buddha is said to have told his disciples. When they wanted him to explain more about how it could be that the soul is not permanent, he said, "That is a question that does not tend toward edification." In other words, there is no answer to that question that will tell you what you really want to know, because the question itself is "unskillful," or frames the discussion in a distorted way. The Buddha said that rather than fret about the concept of an impermanent soul, you should ask yourself, "What am I experiencing?" "Am I experiencing suffering? If so, what's behind that?" In other words, attend to what's going on and gain insight into your crazy little mind; don't ask abstract questions that don't lead to insight.

In this case, the disciples come to Jesus and ask, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Behind that question lie some assumptions. The pervasive cultural context of Roman imperial rule was obsessed with status and domination over people and land. If God also has an empire, you can hear them thinking, it must also have superior and inferior people, people to whom you defer and people who defer to you. Mark Twain had fun with the issue of status in his story, "Captain Stormfield's Trip to Heaven," in which an old-timer in heaven brings a newcomer up to speed:

Between you and me, it does gravel me, the cool way people from those monster worlds outside our system snub our little world, and even our system. Of course we think a good deal of Jupiter, because our world is only a potato to it, for size; but then there are worlds in other systems that Jupiter isn't even a mustard-seed to—like the planet Goobra, for instance, which you couldn't squeeze inside the orbit of Halley's comet without straining the rivets. Tourists from Goobra (I mean parties that lived and died there—natives) come here, now and then, and inquire about our world, and when they find out it is so little that a streak of lightning can flash clear around it in the eighth of a second, they have to lean up against something to laugh. Then they screw a glass into their eye and go to examining us, as if we were a

curious kind of foreign bug, or something of that sort. One of them asked me how long our day was; and when I told him it was twelve hours long, as a general thing, he asked me if people where I was from considered it worth while to get up and wash for such a day as that. That is the way with those Goobra people—they can't seem to let a chance go by to throw it in your face that their day is three hundred and twenty-two of our years long.

The disciples are hoping they'll be more like the souls from Goobra, but Jesus' answer is essentially, "That is a question that does not tend toward edification." He tells them that they must change and become like children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Now, children are by no means exempt from concerns with power and status. "Me first!" is not something you hear from adults when trying to get on the Giant Slide at the fair. Children, much as we love them, require a good bit of training to subdue the "me first" urge. So that's not what Jesus is commending. It seems more likely that he was offering children in their capacity as marginal people, people who by definition do *not* have power or status. If kids could be boss of the world, they would, but grownups will never let them because grownups are bigger and more crafty. Even more so in the ancient world: children were certainly loved by their families, but they were of marginal value and therefore had low status. That's what the disciples are supposed to embrace. Just forget about "who is the greatest in the kingdom," and *become* like children.

The next bit is chilling, and has haunted the unfortunate literal-minded who are mentally ill. "Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! . . . If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away . . ." Nadia Bolz-Weber points out that "if I don't have the force of will it takes to not steal Butterfingers

from KMArt then I hardly think I'd have the force of will it takes to amputate myself. I mean, that just takes more focus and dedication than I have ever had." <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2012/10/a-sermon-on-hacking-off-our-own-limbs-for-jesus/> "This is a text of terror for children. It's like the Gospel according to a grotesque Tim Burton movie."

BUT the text says, "if your hand or foot causes you to *stumble*." It doesn't say "causes you to sin." And it turns out that the Greek word translated "stumble" is *skandalizo*, from which we get the word "scandal." So what we have to cut ourselves off from is scandal. And what is scandal? As we know very well from our political culture, scandal is when everything stops so we can focus on something small instead of on the big picture. "Basket of deplorables" comes to mind. Ilhan Omar's comments on the forbidden topic of Palestinian suffering. Scandal is the distortion of the big picture so that we give too much attention to one small part, and fail to give appropriate attention where it belongs. Maybe Jesus is saying that disciples have to continually reframe, continually attend to the margins and the shadows, not just where the spotlight is shining.

Nadia Bolz-Weber suggests that *skandalon* is sin, in the sense that it places "something or someone or some accomplishment at the center and makes it, and not God the source of our identity. It's loving something as God which is not God. Giving our heart to that which" does not deserve our love. In that case, that thing needs to be cut away. Sometimes we so cut it away as a result of new insight; sometimes it gets cut away, and we find ourselves forced to recalibrate. But *skandalon* is always, at bottom, orientation around the wrong thing, something that is not life-giving.

A philosophy professor named John Kaag recently wrote an interesting article called “Why the demoniac stayed in his comfortable corner of hell,” referring to the story of the Gerasene demoniac whom Jesus cast out into a herd of pigs.

<https://aeon.co/ideas/why-the-demoniac-stayed-in-his-comfortable-corner-of-hell>

He reminds the reader that the demoniac did not want to be exorcised. According to Kierkegaard, ‘One may hear the drunkard say: “Let me be the filth that I am.’ “Those who are the most pointedly afflicted are often precisely those who are least able to recognise their affliction, or to save themselves. And those with the resources to rescue themselves are usually already saved.” That is, the *skandalon* may look like our only hope or relief, which is why we keep going back to it.

Our theme this Lent is Cleaning, and one salient feature of cleaning is that you can’t clean till you’ve seen where the dirt is. Case in point, underneath the washing machine. Need I say more? With the increasing light of the coming spring, we may take a fresh look at our assumptions about what saves us or what is most important, and see where our assumptions are really just a layer of grime covering up bright truth. This is an opportunity for course correction, an opportunity to see the kingdom of God through an undistorted lens, and realize that it’s on the margins, in the shadows, all the places you wouldn’t think to look.

Holy God, your servants argued about who would be greatest in your kingdom. Help us to be confident in the love you have for us, so that we feel no need to compete for your attention. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.