9/30/18 Sermon

Gospel Reading Mark 9:38-50

Sometimes it does take a Rocket Scientist.

Scientists at NASA have developed a gun, more like a cannon, built specifically to launch dead chickens at maximum velocity at the windshields of airliners, military jets, and space shuttles.

The purpose is to simulate the frequent incidents of collisions with airborne fowl to test the strength of the windshields.

British engineers heard about the gun and were eager to test it on the windshields of their new high speed trains.

Arrangements were made, and one of the guns was sent to England.

The British engineers set up the experiment according to the directions of the NASA engineers.

But when the cannon was fired, the engineers were shocked, and watched in horror as the chicken hurtled out of the barrel, crashed in the shatterproof windshield, smashed it to smithereens, crashed through the control console, snapped the engineer’s backrest in two, and embedded itself in the back wall of the cabin.

Horrified Britons sent NASA the disastrous results of the experiment, along with designs of the windshield, and begged the U.S. scientists for suggestions.

NASA’s response was just one sentence, “Thaw the chicken.”

Thawing the chicken was such an obvious thing.

NASA engineers never thought to mention it to their British counterparts.

The disciples said to Jesus:

Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name,

And we tried to stop them, because they were not following us.

And Jesus told them: Thaw out your hearts and minds.

Whoever is not against us is for us. They are doing the work I came to do.

It does not matter if they are part of the same congregation,

or the same denomination, or part of this particular group.

They are doing important work, and will by no means lose their reward.

It would be good as we go about God’s work,

To thaw out of own hearts and minds and welcome all who are serving him,

And to be warm and compassionate to everyone we encounter.

Our frozen hearts and minds are often stumbling blocks to those we wish to help.

A grocery store clerk wrote to Ann Landers, the advice-columnist,

to complain that she had seen people buy “luxury” food items

* like birthday cakes and bags of shrimp - with their food stamps.

The writer went on to say she thought all those people on welfare,

who treated themselves to such non-necessities were “lazy and wasteful.”

A few weeks later, Ann Lander’s column was devoted

Entirely to people who had responded to the grocery clerk.

One woman wrote:

“I didn’t buy a cake, but I did buy a big bag of shrimp with food stamps. So what?

My husband had been working at a plant for fifteen years when it shut down.

The shrimp casserole I made was for our wedding anniversary dinner, and lasted 3 days.

Perhaps the grocery clerk who criticized people using food stamps

Would have a different view of life after walking a mile in my shoes.”

Another woman wrote:

“I’m the woman who bought the $17 cake and paid for it with food stamps.

I thought the check-out woman would burn a hole through me with her eyes.

But what she didn’t know is, the cake was for my little girl’s birthday.

It will be her last.

She has bone cancer and will probably be gone in less than six months.”

We never know what other people are dealing with.

The last thing they need is somebody putting them down.

Instead they need somebody to lift them up.

They need someone with a warm and caring heart to come alongside them and to encourage them when they are down.

We shouldn’t be adding to their trouble,

Simply because our hearts are too frozen to care.

Along with warm, unfrozen hearts,

Jesus urges us to have salt in ourselves, and to be at peace with one another.

Some years ago, two brothers had a very lucrative business on Lake Guntersville in Alabama.

The first would visit the fishermen around the lake,

engage them in conversation,

and offer them some salted peanuts he was enjoying.

About 10 or 15 minutes later, his brother would arrive, pulling a wagon of ice cold soft drinks.

He would sell them for 25 cents each. This was in the days of 5 cent soft drinks.

The saltiness of those peanuts created a great thirst.

And everyone, the brothers and the fishermen, were very happy.

As Christians it would be good for us to imitate these 2 brothers.

We should have salt in ourselves, and be at peace with each other.

Salt creates thirst.

When people look at our lives do they thirst more for God’s love?

Our words and actions ought to be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, causing others to thirst for the peace and joy we experience.

When we speak words of peace and encouragement, we are sprinkling a little salt in the lives of others.

We are being the salty Christians Jesus invited us to be.

Our saltiness can encourage others, but our critical comments can be stumbling blocks.

We shouldn’t cause them to stumble.

We shouldn’t trip them up with our words.

Anyone who is continually criticized becomes good for nothing.

The effect of criticism knocks all the peace and joy out of their lives.

In the award-winning film, The Joy Luck Club, one little girl has the capacity, in her own words,

“to see the secrets of a chessboard.”

This special gift enables her to become a national chess champion by age eight.

Her only liability is a driven parent, who was both envious of her daughter’s gifts and using her to fulfill her own selfish ambition for wealth and power.

At one point, the little girl dares to speak back to her mother.

The woman responds first with an icy silent treatment, then by saying to her daughter,

“You are nothing. You are nothing at all.”

The little girl describes what happened next.

“What she said to me was like a curse.

This power I had, this belief in what I’d been given,

I could actually feel it draining away.

I could feel myself becoming so ordinary.

And all the secrets that I once saw I couldn’t see any more.

All I could see were my mistakes, and my weaknesses,

and the best part of me disappeared.”

That is what our words, and actions, and expressions can do to people.

They can drain away the best parts and leave only their mistakes and weaknesses.

How different it would be if we could always have warm hearts toward everyone.

If we could be welcoming instead of judgmental.

If we could offer a refreshing cup of water to those who are thirsty.

Instead of placing stumbling blocks in their path.

How wonderful if we could be the warm, salty Christians Jesus invites is to be.

AMEN