

Heavenly Surgery

Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47, 48

October 1, 2006

I.

This does not seem to be a happy day for Scripture, does it?. There is tension and irritation, condemnation and judgment, and certainly we heard dramatic and challenging ideas. The worst aspects of human nature seem to be front and center, and the consequences of separation from God are equally clear.

But as we will see, there also are words of grace. Many passages in the Bible have difficult messages, and some of the teachings of Jesus are no exception. But if we read them closely we also see there is hope. God's grace is not far away. There usually is a clear path ahead, if we but only choose to take it. Sometimes that path can be difficult or costly, but it is there if you seek it.

We started today with Moses, who basically asked God why he had to put up with all the complainers and whiners. In the very first line of the reading the Hebrews are described as rabble who grumbled about the manna that had been given to them. Then, in a classic display of ingratitude, they spoke fondly of the food they ate during their captivity in Egypt.

In effect, they were saying that the food they received from the Egyptians was more important than the freedom they received from God. And the reading tells us that the anger of the Lord blazed hotly.

Moses was frustrated. He too was fed up. And to paraphrase Moses, he inquired of God, "Why must I bear the burdens of these people, did I give birth to them, am I to be their nurse?" And God, in his grace, told Moses to delegate, and cleared the way for seventy elders to be appointed to help Moses deal with the dysfunctional group he was leading through the desert.

In the second reading, James rebuked those who judged others, and he condemned the selfish who had become rich and comfortable by taking advantage of those who had less. He said "come now, you rich, and howl for the miseries that are about to come upon you." He proclaimed that their riches would eat their flesh like fire.

But James also offered hope for those who submitted themselves to God. He said, "resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you." Isn't that truly a source of comfort and strength? "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you."

And then we come to today's Gospel, which has several parts. First, there is the teaching about the stranger casting out demons in Jesus' name, and Jesus' refusal to intervene because the stranger was doing Jesus' work even though he was not one of the disciples.

Then there was the part about the dire consequences of leading others into sin. Jesus used the example of a child to illustrate the new and emerging doctrine of faith and belief he was teaching. He said that people who messed with his flock might as well be thrown into the sea with millstones around their necks.

After this we come to the really gruesome part of the reading, at least on the surface. Jesus said that if your hand or your foot caused you to sin, cut it off because that is better than going to hell. As if that was not enough, he then said if your eye caused you to sin, pluck it out, because you are better off with one eye in the kingdom than with two eyes in hell. That's how St. Mark recorded Jesus' words. And the Book of Matthew says the same thing, in two different places. This reading is not a mistake in translation.

I want to spend some time on this part of the reading because it begs to be explained. Many of us have heard these words before. Their impact and dramatic nature remain fixed in our memories, and from time to time we must wonder what they really mean. We want to believe that there must be realistic purposes beneath what appear to be unrealistic demands.

As we explore this part of today's reading we will see that it does indeed carry a realistic and meaningful Christian message. And it is important to understand that message in order to avoid two opposite but equal dangers.

One danger is that without some sense of Jesus' real meaning, we simply tend to ignore what he said, which is a bad practice. We cannot pick and choose from the Bible, and use what we like but disregard what we don't.

The other danger is that we can take these words too seriously, too literally. In doing that we can misunderstand Jesus and fail to see the real meaning in his teachings. This approach also can spill over into how we interpret other parts of the Bible, with the risk of being misled about God's Word.

II.

So, why did Jesus deliver demands in such harsh terms? Couldn't he just have told a parable, or said what he wanted to say a little less graphically?

For openers, I can stand here today and tell you that it will not cost you an arm and a leg to get to heaven. And just as I used a metaphor in that last sentence, so also Jesus was speaking metaphorically when he identified body parts with sin, and then said those body parts, those sins, must be cut away.

Perhaps Jesus used shocking images with the disciples in order to drive his point home. If we remember last week's Gospel, he had just caught the disciples pridefully arguing about who was the greatest. He told them that if they wanted to be first they must be last. And today, it seemed that the disciples were jealous because someone else, not part of their group, was casting out demons in Jesus' name. Jesus, however, rejected their complaints and gave his stamp of approval to what that other person was doing.

As a result, there possibly was a need for a dramatic teaching. During the journey to Jerusalem that occupies this part of Mark's Gospel, Jesus was proclaiming the coming of God's kingdom. This was no small thing. In fact, the coming of the kingdom was then and remains now the most significant event that could possibly occur in the history of the world.

Jesus was not talking about changing our lives in minor ways. He did not come just to offer a few helpful hints about self-improvement. The kingdom of God is not just a little program to encourage people to be nicer to each other. And you don't create enemies who want to kill you merely because you are suggesting a little change here and a little change there.

No, Jesus was talking about a hugely different new world. He was proclaiming a new reality that was beyond the comprehension of most people at the time. Perhaps Jesus felt the need to use radical and grisly imagery to get peoples' attention. Perhaps he felt that telling people to cut off their hands and feet, and to pluck out their eyes, was the only way to make his point.

III.

And that point was that the kingdom is for the faithful, and faithful living can be difficult. Satan does not tempt us with unpleasant things, and sometimes we can become very attached to those things that we are called to give up if we are to live the lives Jesus wants us to live.

Let's face it. The gospel today is about sin, and in some churches it is not fashionable to talk about sin. Some of the more modern translations of this Gospel do not even talk about sinning, and instead water it down and describe it as stumbling. I wonder what they would call it when people are lying flat on their faces in the mud?

In any event, the larger point is that real sin comes from the heart and the mind, not from the hands and the feet. Sin, which is separation from God, comes from our attitudes, and our practices, and our habits that we know or suspect are wrong, but that we do anyway. These are the things that today's Gospel calls us to cut out, to get rid of, to remove from ourselves and our lives. Jesus' language is symbolic, but the meaning is real.

IV.

If Jesus were here today perhaps he would use different terminology. In first century Palestine, during Jesus' time, amputation was a common medical treatment. It often was necessary to remove an infected part of the body to save an earthly life just as Jesus was speaking symbolically of doing the same to save our eternal lives.

Today, however, there are have other options. Rather than literally cutting something off perhaps Jesus could have referred to more modern techniques. What about righteous radiation, or Christian chemotherapy, or spiritual arthroscopy, or a blessed bypass? While the metaphors would be different, the meaning would be the same. And while Jesus' treatment would be different, the result would be the same. The condition of sin, if it is treated successfully, would be gone.

What are some of these conditions that we must cut out as we live to enter God's kingdom? Reach into yourself and examine what you see. Ask God in prayer to help you. Think about the Psalms where David said to God "search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!"

Perhaps you might find lingering resentment against someone the enemy uses to keep you from a full relationship with God. Perhaps there might be unforgiveness, or a judgmental way of viewing others. Perhaps there might be envy, or pride, or an excessive interest in material things that gets in the way of faith or stewardship. And maybe there are temptations that we seem unable to resist.

Whatever it might be, these are the things that Jesus calls us to renounce, to remove from ourselves, and to cut out. These things are described as hands, feet, and eyes in today's Gospel, but they could be anything in today's world. They are different for each of us, and each of us probably has some idea of what they are.

The problem is in doing something about it. Sometimes it can be difficult. It can very difficult where addictions are involved. And sometimes we don't succeed when we try, and we have to try again. But today's Gospel calls us to persevere. And if we call upon the Holy Spirit as we persevere, we can be empowered to do what otherwise might seem to be impossible.

Preachers have been giving sermons about sin for centuries. And we know that some of those sermons have been messages of damnation rather than grace. God, however, does not want to condemn us. He sent his Son so that we might be saved. In that act we find God's grace, and in that grace we find our hope and the way out.

V.

I once accompanied a friend to an open Alcoholics Anonymous meeting to offer my support. At one point during the meeting the leader announced that it was time for progress pins to be distributed. The first pins went to all who had been clean and sober for thirty days. Then

came pins for those who had been clean and sober for six months. After that, people who had been clean and sober for one year received their pins. Then, with seriousness and solemnity, he announced it was time for the most important pins of all. He asked anyone to come forward who had been clean and sober for twenty-four hours.

A journey begins with the first step. And today's gospel tells us that if we have not taken that step to cut out the things within us that prevent us from having a holy relationship with God, then now is the time to start. And the first twenty-four hours could be the hardest.

As I said earlier, today's readings might not be among our favorite Bible passages. They are not the verses we recite with our children as we put them to bed. But even so, God's grace shines through. If we live the faithful lives to which we have been called, our rewards will be eternal and beyond anything we can imagine.

But we are not called to go it alone. In the case of addictions, every twelve step program in existence recognizes the importance of community, and accountability, and mentoring. Those same concepts exist in the church through fellowship, worship, and discipleship.

Just as Jesus sent the disciples out two by two, the church is here to be our companion. Dealing with the temptations and distractions of the world alone can be difficult. Dealing with them together, in the church, with each other, led by the Holy Spirit, is a lot easier.

We usually cannot transform ourselves overnight. And there usually is no flash bang moment when we just suddenly find ourselves free of the things we have been trying to get out of our lives. It can be a process, a journey, sometimes with two steps forward and one step back, and that journey is easier if it is shared with others.

Jesus spoke to the disciples as a group, and he speaks to us as a group. Here, in the church, in community with others, we can find God's grace and the way to a holy life no matter what our lives have been like in the past. And together, as we follow him, we can find peace, and comfort, and support. *Amen.*