

**“Do You Need Surgery?”**  
**Mark 9:38-50; Psalm 27:7-14**

A number of years ago, I attended one of those mega churches here in Greenville. The professional singers they had up front were quite good, but most people looked to be watching the show instead of participating in the singing. And I realize big screens in the sanctuary are not my thing, but I could have used a cross or two, or some Christian symbolism.

And I wondered how many people there recognized the strong and definite statement being made when no women were allowed to participate in a ministerial role. I hope people with daughters understand the message these churches are sending and proclaiming about the place, or lack of a place, women are to occupy in faith communities, and in the world.

And a while back I went to a service at the Vatican in Rome where the Pope consecrated some bishops. I like the new Pope. But I certainly don't think Popes are infallible. In fact, history shows they are quite the opposite. And I believe Mary, Jesus' mother, was a really good person. But it seems to me the Catholics get way out on a limb with all the theological jargon they place on Mary.

And I also must admit that the Episcopalians have a ways to go. First of all, I'm not sure how Protestant they really are. The way they get up and down in their services, if you close your eyes real hard, you may think you are in a Roman Catholic Church.

And now that I think about it, I'm not all that crazy about the Lutherans. You have to love Martin Luther. But their attempt to define the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper by insisting that Jesus is present in the bread and wine is a little difficult to grasp.

And I like the Methodists' concept of the heart being an important part of faith. But their reliance on bishops I find disconcerting. Giving one person that much power can lead to bad decisions.

Which brings me to the Baptists, who have too little central control. Historically, they don't have creeds because they thought everyone should be free to believe as their conscience dictates. These days they have certainly lost that freedom of conscience idea when it comes to social issues.

And don't even get me started about the Pentecostals, Disciples of Christ, Church of Christ, Anglicans, or Greek Orthodox.

When it comes to politics or religion I am always reminded of that old joke: “No one understands what God really wants except you and me. And I'm not so sure about you.”

In our scripture, Jesus and the disciples are in Capernaum when Jesus is approached by John, the only time in Mark when John is the center of attention with Jesus. “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

Jesus surprises John by replying, “Let him be. Whoever is not against us is for us. Anyone who gives a cup of water in my name is doing the right thing.”

Then, Jesus proceeds with a warning, “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believes in me, it would be better if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.”

Jesus then gets even more personal: “Look, if your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out. It is better to live without these body parts than to have them cause you to sin.”

A nearby farmers market was clogging up the parking lot of an Ohio church on Sunday mornings. So, the church put up a sign that said: “Church parking only on Sunday. Trespassers will be baptized.”

Like this church, Jesus is reminding us that trespassing requires dramatic action.

“Whoever is not against us is for us.”

Being tolerant is difficult. It takes a concerted, continuing effort. My opening illustration is a reminder how most of us are drawn to the five percent where we disagree with someone, forgetting the ninety-five percent on which we agree. For instance, I may disagree with some Roman Catholic theology, but Roman Catholicism, though its pronouncements can be rigid, does a much better job than most Protestants of creating a big tent for people with divergent views. You don’t see them splitting up every time they disagree over something. And, their Catholic Charities do wonderful mission work and the bishops’ doctrine of a “preference for the poor” is a powerful theological statement.

Notice what John says to Jesus: “...we tried to stop him because he was not following *us*.” Us. John ties himself to Jesus. Most of us believe what we think is what Jesus thought. That is not all bad because it motivates and inspires us to do what we believe Jesus wants us to do, say, and think. But it is so easy for it to become about us instead of Jesus.

None of us fully grasps the divine. None of us possesses a monopoly on the truth. Hopefully, each of us continues to grow in faith and love and wisdom as we worship, pray, and contemplate God’s word and will.

The ancient Christian affirmation was: “Jesus is Lord.” Declaring that designated one as a follower of Christ. It is easy, and tempting, to keep adding on caveats to this simple, but powerful, affirmation.

“Whoever is not against us is for us.” The faith is powerfully proclaimed to those outside the Church when Christians react to one another with love and humility.

A full of herself religious woman was deeply shocked when her new neighbors called on Sunday morning and asked to borrow her lawn mower. “The very idea of cutting grass on Sunday,” she ranted to her husband. “It is shameful to break the fourth commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy. So, tell them they can’t have it! Tell them our lawn mower is broken!”

Before we vociferously correct the theological mistakes of others, we might want to check our own ability to keep the commandments.

“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.”

People in the first century clearly understood this analogy. A Roman sentence of death could be carried out by attaching one of the millstones commonly pulled by donkeys to grind grain around one’s neck and throw the person in the river. This method of drowning someone was particularly gruesome. But, Jesus says it is better to die this way than to cause a little one to stumble in their faith.

Now, no one is certain how to determine who Jesus means when He uses the term “little ones.” Some speculate he is referring to children. But most commentators believe the term casts a wider net, also designating the poor, the infirm, those decimated by life’s twists and turns.

Jesus’ statement is a reminder that with leadership comes responsibility. With wealth comes responsibility. With education comes responsibility. Jesus tells us we are to act in His name. Acting in Jesus’ name means responding to others as Jesus did. It calls on us to share our resources, to speak out for those who are oppressed, to take the side of the powerless. We use all our gifts, talents and abilities to see that others are afforded the same opportunities God has so graciously granted to each one of us.

The New Testament scholar, William Barclay, noted a story by the great short story writer, O. Henry, in which he tells of a little girl whose mother died. Every day, her father would come home from work, take off his coat, sit down, open his paper, light his pipe, and put up his feet. The little girl would ask him to play with her a little while because she was lonely. He told her he was tired, to let him be, for her to go out in the street and play. So, she did. And, inevitably, she eventually took to the streets.

Well, years went by and the little girl, now a woman, died. O. Henry says that when she appeared in heaven, St. Peter said to Jesus, “Master, here’s a girl who was a bad person. I suppose we send her straight to hell?”

“No,” Jesus gently replied, “Let her in. Let her in.” But then Jesus’ eyes grew stern and he said, “But look for the man who refused to play with his little girl and who sent her out to the streets and send him to Hell.”

With blessings, with opportunities, with leadership, with resources, with children also come responsibility.

“And if your hand or foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out.”

These mental portraits are dramatic, and cringe worthy. But that is on purpose. Jesus is saying anything that draws us away from faith in him must be dealt with immediately, and radically.

Why does a woman undergo a mastectomy? To cut all of the cancer out so it cannot infect the rest of the body.

Why does the alcoholic totally give up alcohol? Because one little drink will re-infect the body with the insatiable desire for more.

All of us understand this illustration. Every one of us has a weakness for certain things that when ingested mentally, physically, or spiritually will spread and grow disseminating poison throughout our entire body, heart, or mind.

And, each of us is different. For some, their poison is drugs or alcohol. The slightest use lights the fire of their addiction. For others it is pornography or casual sex. Others are addicted to gossip, nagging, or seeing everything in a negative light. Greed and stinginess are temptations for all of us. And, for Christians, self-righteousness and spiritual arrogance always lurk around the corner.

This list could go on and on. But Jesus uses such harsh language because he wants us to recognize the insidious nature of sin. He is pushing us to acknowledge how bigotry, jealousy, love of money, pride leads to behavior that harms us and others.

For the alcoholic, it is just one glass of wine. For the gossip, it is just one little story. For the sexually tempted, it is just one innocent flirtation. This verse applies to every single one of us. Whatever your temptation, cut it out, radically and completely. Because if we do not, it will infect, poison, and destroy God's hold on our lives.

In his E-Newsletter of July 2, 2010, Al Batt said that when he turned eighteen, he told his father he should be able to stay out as late as he wanted. His father agreed. He told him as long as Al made it home in time to milk the cows in the morning, he was okay with it. But, then, his father added, because the car was only eleven years old, it still needed to be home by midnight.

Whether 18, 38, 68, or 88, removing ourselves from temptation can save our life, and our soul.

#### “Do You Need Surgery?”

Most of us attempt to put off the radical surgery that will cut sin out of our lives. We convince ourselves our temptation is harmless, until it spreads to all parts of our existences, wreaking destruction wherever it is found. As followers of Christ we are to display the love, forgiveness, and tolerance Jesus showed us. With our faith comes the responsibility to care for what Jesus called the “little ones” — everyone from children to the least of these.

This morning, are there elements of your life that need to be cut off or torn out? Temptations that are polluting your spiritual life? Your relationships? Your family?

Today, are you and I ready and willing to perform the surgery that will enable us to love more, forgive more, be more like Jesus?

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