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Sermon 26th September 2021 – 18th Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Mark 9:38-50

Delivered by Rev'd Michele Knight

May my thoughts, words and heart be true to you O Lord, and may those who listen know your will in their lives.

Some weeks ago, Sel preached a sermon that, in part, spoke about how we use the word 'literally' incorrectly in our everyday speech. She told us that this word is meant to be understood in an exact sense, as something that is or has actually happened. However, in common language, as well as in the Oxford dictionary, this word can also be used for emphasis while not being used to describe something in an exact manner. Using 'literally' in this sense is usually known linguistically as hyperbole – that is using exaggerated statements or claims meant to or make a point.

Fortunately, this is what Jesus was doing in our reading from Mark's Gospel today. If we were to take Jesus' words literally in the sense that they talk about an actual expectation, or I would be looking out at all of you and wondering why I'm not seeing too many amputees. After all, Jesus did say that that if something causes you to stumble, your foot, your hand, your eye, then cut it off. Where are all the missing limbs? No Jesus is using hyperbole and metaphor in these words.

This is one of those texts that we do not take literally but look at what teaching lies behind Jesus' words. Jesus is asking us in this reading to take a step back and really look at our lives, what it is that affects our faith in God and then to take action to change or remove it. So, it's not about plucking out our eyes, so we don't watch or read inappropriate things. Or cutting of our hands to stop us from stealing. Or cutting off our foot so we don't attend places that we shouldn't. Because this won't change our heart. These literal acts will only change our ability to do the things our heart actually wants us to do. It's about removing the things in our lives that lead us into sin – those things which separate us from God.

When Jesus talks about cutting off a hand, or a foot, or gouging out an eye what he is doing is telling us a couple of things about ourselves. The first thing he's doing is pointing out the obvious: We would rather die than change something about ourselves or stop doing something even though we know it is destructive to ourselves and our relationships with other people.

A good example of this can be seen on various TV programs which follow people who are addicted to whatever it is they are addicted too; drugs, hoarding stuff, or whatever it is that people find themselves addicted to. The person with the addiction thinks that it's almost impossible to change their life or their circumstances. If they do, then they think they'll lose the false comfort they get from their addiction. But you don't even need to have an addiction to those things to be resistant to a good change in your life. Some people are so convinced that they know better than anyone or everyone else and the heck with anyone who tries to challenge or question them. If you don't believe me, think about some of the words from those folk protesting in Melbourne this week.

Some people are so stubborn, and their hearts are so hardened that even if Jesus Christ himself came to them in person and told them that they need to get their act together, they would respond, “Well Jesus, what in the world do you know anyway.”

When Jesus spoke these words that we heard today, we might be tempted to think that Jesus is being a little too harsh. But that is the point. He’s being harsh and he’s speaking so loudly and clearly so that everyone can hear him. What Jesus is doing is using hyperbole; he is exaggerating one point to make bigger point. In the verses I’ve been focusing on, verses 43-48, he mentions metaphorically cutting off a hand, or a foot, or gouging out an eye that is causing you to stumble because he wants to make a bigger point. The bigger picture Jesus is trying to paint for you here is this; would you rather miss out on a whole new world that has already started to break into the here and now, where people like you are freed, forgiven, and loved by God totally and completely, and brought into a community that actually loves and cares about each other, or would you rather be left to your own self destructive devices, left to your own self-destructive tendencies that not only will end up cutting you off from God but also from the people you claim to know and care for. Or if Jesus were to say this differently, he might say, “Do you want to be with me, live with me where I still carry the holes in my hands and in my side, scars from where I was crucified and bled and died for you? Or would you rather keep yourself intact even if it means eternal separation from me and my Father?”

The life of a Christian is a life of giving up and of letting go. That doesn’t mean that we give up on life and let go of it. What that means is that apart from Christ, there is no life. Even though we may still be breathing, thinking, walking, and talking, jumping and running around, that doesn’t really mean that we are living the life God has won for us. Even if we are breathing, thinking, walking, talking, running, and jumping around, there is always the bitter reality that we just might be stone-cold dead on the inside and we know it. What you’ve got to do is take a good long look at our hearts and if we see that there are some things which are not worthwhile in there, well, we are on the road of recovery. It’s a good thing that you need a new heart though; this is one of those things that God is very good at doing. He’s the best cardiologist known to humanity. In fact, he’s the only Cardiologist that can actually give you a heart that will not wither and decay and fail with the passing of time. The question then for us is do we want this new heart and new life as a gift from God, or do we want to cling to everything about ourselves that does nothing good except pull us away from the God who made us, the God who has come to save and redeem you and me, the God who is always at work turning us into the new creations like He has promised? You would think that this would be an easy question to answer. But it’s the most difficult question for everyone to answer because it means admitting that God’s way is right and that we really need to face the music. Because either we hold on as tightly as we can to everything about us because that’s comfortable and because, as we often like to say about and so kid ourselves, “That’s just the way that I am,” or we agree with God, start working on those selfish aspects of who we are, and then and only then will we start to realize that not only is God right about us and how separated we are from God, but also we’ll start to realize how awesome and freeing it is to give up and let go of everything that holds us back from the true life that God wants and has won for us already.

So, what we need to do is to identify those things in our lives that are affecting our relationship with God. Perhaps they are the people we associate with – how we spend our spare time on our computers or phones – the TV shows we watch, the music we listen to. As well as cutting out or amputating the toxic influences in our lives, we must also seek to change our lives from within. We need to spend more time with God in prayer, worship and reading our bibles. That's what we call repentance – a word drawn from Roman military times which means to turn around 180 degrees, in other words, turn to face in the opposite way, when we literally turn around and turn to God. Both these decisions are important.

As we go through life, we know that we are going to face difficulties. We are going to face times of suffering. But we need to understand that like a loving parent God wants us to keep moving forward with him and growing in our faith. God is leading us forward if we will only listen. Is it an easy way forward? No. Do we know what's around the corner? No. Is God with us? YES – you bet he is. And so, God has given us the way forward with him as St James reveals:

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. The problem is that when we face those difficulties we want to go back. Back to the way things were. Back to the good old days.

The passage this week is a tough and a very serious one. Not that other place in Scripture isn't just as tough of course. It's good to remember that Jesus wasn't speaking to the unconverted or the godless in this passage, he was speaking to the disciples. So let this passage encourage you this week and always as you go about the business of literally amputating any and all impurities from your life as we pray that God the Father will give us modern day disciples the courage and strength to listen and to obey Jesus. And may the Holy Spirit continue to lead us into holy lives and holy living. Amen.