

THIS IS A SERIOUS MATTER!

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This week, I am using the same reading that Rick McKinley did last week. Rick preached an excellent sermon on the last part of the scripture reading, the part about salt and being God's salt in the world. This part of the lesson is a favourite of many.

The portion of the reading, however, that precedes the part Rick used is not one of your favourites, I'm sure.ⁱ I doubt that it's anyone's favourite. It's about temptation and sin, and quite gruesome. "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off." And your feet, cut them off. And your eyes, pluck them out. The images are so graphic, so vivid, so grotesque, so disturbing that we wonder why on earth the compilers of the lectionary included it.

Yet it comes from Jesus' instructions to his disciples just before they left his homeland, a leadership seminar he began a few verses earlier. What he says is good for them. Four times, he says, "It would be better for you...." For what heavenly purpose then could he be using such strong, descriptive imagery?

The first time I remember hearing this piece of scripture was not in Sunday school or church. It was at the movies. It was in a b-movie with Ray Milland called *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes*. Milland plays a scientist who is developing drugs that will enhance sight. He uses himself as a guinea pig and one day notices that all the people in his office and lab appear to have no clothes on. He can see right through them like Superman with x-ray eyes. Soon he can see not just through clothes but skin. Gradually his vision gets even more profound. He can see deeper and deeper until near the end of the movie he is traumatized by what he can see. He can see deep into the centre of existence. He can see to the end of the universe. He can see God.

Extremely agitated he runs in panic scarcely able to see anything because he sees through everything. He runs but he is unable to escape the consequences of his actions. He runs closing his eyes, putting his hands over his face, but it does no good. He can see right through them. He runs and comes to a huge tent, a revival meeting.

Going inside he hears a hellfire and brimstone preacher, "And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out." Milland looks down and when he looks up, he has plucked his eyes from their sockets. I nearly jumped right out of my seat. It was shocking. This was a serious matter.

Now I suppose that Milland's character solved his problem accepting the consequences of his actions, but does anyone really take this piece of scripture so literally?

I think you can go into the most conservative, fundamentalist, literalistic, Bible-believing church, a congregation where women cover their heads, don't wear pants or speak in church, where men don't swear oaths or cut the lawn on Sunday, and you won't find very many people wearing eye patches or wrapped stumps. Even those dead set against modern Biblical criticism are critical of this passage. No one takes it literally.

What then is Jesus saying to his disciples on the eve of their departure? What does he mean? One commentator calls this "shock therapy."ⁱⁱ So serious is this matter that the most creative, powerful means of conveying it was necessary.

Jesus doesn't want us to take him literally but seriously. We have a soul that is as precious and lovely, even more precious and lovely, than our bodies. It's wholeness is important, a serious matter. "If [your soul] is sick, you are sick all over and if [your soul] is crippled then your two good legs cannot take you anywhere worth going."ⁱⁱⁱ

For some reason, although we often talk about spiritual health, we aren't as careful with our souls as with our bodies. Talk of spiritual sickness doesn't seem to make us flinch like this image of gouged eyes and amputated hands and feet. So Jesus' scary words are shock therapy. They get our attention and keep it. What he is saying is that beholding God has its consequences and following Jesus is not a casual affair.^{iv} It is a life-or-death thing. It's dangerous not just because of what others might do to us, but because of what we might do to ourselves if we don't take ourselves seriously.

Everything we say or do counts. As disciples, followers, apprentices of Jesus we get no time off. We can't take a break and be Christians only some of the time. What we say or do is observed and experienced by others. We can be part of the good news for them or we can be bad news. We can help them to steady themselves, urge them forward, encourage them, or we can be stumbling blocks,

obstacles causing them to stumble or take the wrong path, or get lost, and fall away from the faith that should bring life.

Think for a moment about the story of the teaching of the Lord's Prayer. In this story as Luke tells it, the disciples of Jesus come to him and ask, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."^v At first glance, this appears like a very logical, practical request. They want to grow spiritually. They want to learn how to pray. But they already know how to pray. They are Jews. They would all be familiar, as Jesus was, with the Psalms, which is their prayer book. They had been praying since childhood. So what were they really asking?

Jewish prayers in the Temple were prayed aloud. Prayers were meant to be overheard, not, in principle at least, for bragging purposes, but so that people could hear about the God to whom they prayed and hear the prayers brought to this God, and learn. Notice that the disciples ask Jesus not just to teach them to pray, but as John taught his disciples. In other words, what will we pray so that when people hear us they will learn of you? What can we say that is important and unique, that sets us apart from the Temple and from John, that witnesses to you, to your relationship to God and to your ministry which we share? The disciples knew and we must know that our faith will be overheard and overseen. It is important, Jesus says, it is serious, it is crucial, so pay attention and watch what you say and do.

This saying by Jesus is, however, much more than a threat. It is also a promise. It is a positive promise that he cares about the little ones, the children, the new Christians, the weak and injured, the marginalized and disenfranchised, the powerless. So important are they to Jesus that mistreating them has grave consequences. So important are they to Jesus that his disciples have serious responsibilities toward them.

A theological professor once said to those who wished to identify themselves as God's people and to exclude others, "Be careful when you draw lines. Whenever you draw a line which helps to tell who is in and who is out of God's people – remember – Jesus is always on the other side of the line!"^{vi} "I am on the side of the outsiders," Jesus says. "I am on the side of the weak, the 'little ones', the children and those of childlike faith. And you need to be on their side as well."

But the promise is even more than this. When we are on their side, when we are with Jesus in his ministry and mission we have the

promise of power. Each of us has unrealized power, and Jesus is begging us to wake up and use it wisely and responsibly. It is a serious matter.

And surely, there is no one in the whole world better able to care for people body and soul than we are, to care for the little ones, to care for the outsiders, to care for the vulnerable, the wounded, the hurt. We are the baptized who have been given the gift of God's spirit, a gift that enables us to see with new eyes and to look at people as God does. We see when people are not whole and it grieves us. When they hurt, we hurt. When they are missing something, we are diminished ourselves. We cannot therefore stand by when people are diminished, when they are put down, when they are caused to stumble and surely, we cannot participate in that diminishment. It would be better for us to chop off pieces of our bodies than to see someone's soul injured, even murdered. It is a serious matter.

So serious is it that Jesus gave his own body. He gave his own hands and feet and even his heart to be pierced for our and the world's sins, so that we might be freed and empowered to bless and make peace.

Today we come to the table of Christ Jesus our Lord to receive his body and blood so that our spirits and souls might be whole and we might have new eyes, new feet, new hands. May each of us use our two eyes to see the world as God sees it, use our two feet to carry us where Jesus goes before us, and use our two arms to reach out to someone in danger of stumbling or has already stumbled, so that through us God might steady them, lift them up and save us all.

So may it be for you and me. So may it be. Amen.

ⁱ Mark 9: 38-50.

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Shock Therapy," *Bread of Angels* (Cowley Publications, 1997) pp. 114-118.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brown Taylor, pg. 116.

^{iv} See also Moses interaction with God on Mt. Sinai when he asked to see God's glory. Exodus 33: 17-23; 34: 1-9, 29-35

^v Luke 11: 1-4.

^{vi} Unnamed author quoted in Richard A. Jensen, *Preaching Mark's Gospel* (CSS Publishing, 1996), pp. 60 and 149.