

“If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.” (Mark 9:44)

Bread, butter, eggs. It's just before five o'clock when I dash into Martin's for a quick shopping errand. Bread, butter, eggs. Bread, butter, eggs. O, what do I see: cupcakes are on sale. I'll take half a dozen; pumpkin flavor – just right for the coming season. And potato chips, two for the price of one. Can't pass up on that. As I turn around, I spot the sea salt caramels. I still have some at home, but I know the jar is almost finished, so might as well pick up another one. I quickly add a bunch of asparagus to my cart; don't want the teller at checkout to think I am only buying junk food. I finally make it back to the car, with many more items than I originally intended to get. Embarrassed I walk back to the store – forgot the eggs.

I am still new as your rector, and as we get to know each other better, I remain eager to show my best self – to be attentive to needs, to be punctual for appointments, to preach sermons that are not too long, and so on. But my best self is not all there is. I have a wonderful sweet tooth, and I can be an impulse shopper. Over time, I have learned to avoid going to the grocery store when I am hungry, because, invariable, I'll end up with more than I needed, and most of it, not very helpful to my continuing effort to maintain a healthier diet.

“If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off,” Jesus says. “if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out.” (~Mark 9: 43-47)

Today, we are confronted with one of the most difficult, puzzling texts in the Gospel according to Mark. At a time in our common life, when many of us are feeling anxious or vulnerable about the future, or perhaps even hurting or grieving, it is perhaps the last Gospel we need to hear. Today, we need to have an encounter with Jesus who assures us of God's love; who reminds us that our sins are forgiven, and that God comes looking for us, as a shepherd who has lost a sheep. Instead, here is a Jesus who threatens with the fire and pain of hell, and invites, encourages, hurtful practices of mutilation that thankfully are not part of Christianity, as we know it today, except for some of the sickest, cultist groups within our faith. And yet, despite its hard words and gruesome imagery, I find comfort in these words this week.

Our reading is a continuation of our reading last week. Remember, the disciples were arguing among themselves who is the greatest, and Jesus puts a child in their midst, hugs it, and says: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me.” (Mark 9:37a) John quickly interjects: what about those people who are casting out demons in your name, but they are not even disciples like we are?” John would make a great politician today. It's interesting to note that John is mentioned twice in Mark's gospel – at both occasions he seems to fully miss the point Jesus is trying to make. But what about...

Jesus turns back to his original point. The little child most likely still in their midst, Jesus continues: “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.” We can sense Jesus’ frustration – if you still do not get it; to be a follower in the Way of Jesus is to have greater care for those in the community that are vulnerable: the widows and orphans, the sick, the hungry and the poor, the outcast, and the foreigner. “Whoever welcomes one of these, welcomes me.” In most graphic terms, Jesus seems to say: stop all the nonsense that stands in the way.

In these harsh verses, Jesus invites us to drop the things in our own lives that are holding us back. Anger. Guilt. Shame. Anxiety.

- Yes, there is room for anger in our lives – anger at injustice, unfairness; there is no more powerful force for change in this world than righteous anger. But there is also anger that takes hold of us deep in our heart, takes control over us, and eats us alive. Jesus invites us to let go of this kind of all-consuming, destructive anger.
- The same is true of shame and guilt. Too often we carry our shame and guilt around as heavy burdens that tear us down; rather than helping us grow into mature and spiritually healthy human beings, guilt and shame keep us in a state of existential suffering and pain, as if a great millstone were hung around our neck.
- Anguish and anxiety are destructive emotions that diminish our sense of self-worth; they reduce our ability for joy and enjoyment, to make friendships and to form relationships. Jesus invites us to let go of this, to cut it off. If there are emotions, habits, addictions in your life that keep you broken down, stop it and claim your healing, Jesus says. God is found in our wholeness and wellness.

Jesus criticism in the Gospel is not just directed to the disciples for their inability to understand his teaching, or to us, but to all that stands in the way of our healing, forgiveness, and redemption. Jesus says: life is hard enough; do not make it any harder than it already is. Be kind to each other; love each other; support, nurture, heal each other; and forgive each other. Life is hard enough.

I want to leave you with a witness of healing and redemption; of discharging those things that tear one down.

She was raped at the age of 8. Her rapist was found guilty but spent only one day in jail. After he was released, he was murdered. Because of the trauma, she became mute for almost 5 years, believing that her voice killed him. "I killed him that man. because I told his name. And, then I thought I would never speak again, because my voice would kill anyone ..." Her name was Marguerite Ann Johnson. Later in life, she would change her name . . . to Maya Angelou.

Angelou was challenged by her friend, author James Baldwin, to write an autobiography, which became "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings". The book would be critically acclaimed but banned in schools and libraries because of its honest depiction of rape.

When asked by an interviewer why she wrote about the experience, she indicated that she wanted

to demonstrate the complexities of rape. She also wanted to prevent it from happening to someone else, so that anyone who had been raped might gain understanding and not blame herself for it. Later, she would write: "You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them."

Defiantly, she proclaims:

"Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops.
Weakened by my soulful cries..."

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise..."

Amen.