

Sermons at  
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

October 6, 2024 (Proper 21, Year B)  
Given a week later  
Mark 9:38-50

Now I'll bet Jesus got your attention there. These are some of the harshest words that Jesus ever speaks. He says it's better to mutilate yourself, to cut off your hand or your foot, or tear out your eye than to end up in hell WITH them. These aren't the kind of things we'd expect JESUS to say; Peter or Paul maybe, but NOT JESUS. So what's going ON here? Why does Jesus use such STRONG language?

You know, there are a lot of Christians, even preachers, that take EVERYTHING in the Bible literally. They say that the Bible always means exactly what it says, and says what it means – no interpretation needed. I sometimes wonder why we don't see those folks MISSING a hand or a foot or an eye. Does Jesus really want us to LITERALLY cut off our hands and feet and tear out our eyes if we sin? Well NO, OF COURSE not.

It's called hyperbole. Jesus is INTENTIONALLY EXAGGERATING to make a point. He wants us to NOTICE this story, to get our attention. There's something PARTICULARLY important going on here that Jesus wants to make sure we don't miss. It's almost as if Jesus believes this is a matter of life and death. And so it is.

There was a story in the newspaper some years ago that had the headline, "Climber Amputates Own Arm To Save His Life." His story was eventually made into a book and movie called 127 hours. The story read:

In the wilds of a Utah desert, without water or anyone who could come to his aid, Aron Ralston had only two choices: He could die partly pinned beneath the 1,000-pound boulder that had fallen on him days earlier during a daring climb. Or he could amputate his arm.

All he had was a flimsy, dull pocketknife.

But it worked.

On Thursday afternoon, a bloody and dehydrated Ralston was found walking in Canyonlands National Park in eastern Utah. What was left of his right arm was wrapped in a makeshift tourniquet that he had fashioned after setting himself free from the rock. Once free, he had rappelled 75 feet down from the remote canyon perch where he had been trapped since Saturday.

Mike Hill, a spokesman for the National Park, said, "To survive that long before he decided to do what he did, and to have the mental fortitude to do that, is incredible." Rangers at the park could not recall any other comparable acts of survival. (By Rene Sanchez and Kimberly Edds, Washington Post Staff Writers Saturday, May 3, 2003; Page A01.)

But Ralston's desperate and grisly decision is not without precedent. In Pennsylvania a decade ago, a construction worker pinned beneath a fallen oak tree also used a pocketknife to cut off part of his leg to escape. And about that time in Colorado, a fisherman trapped beneath a boulder took the same excruciating step.

There you have real life examples of what Jesus means. If it causes you to stumble, cut it off, tear it out. It's better to live without it, than to die with it.

It makes you wonder whether we would have the courage to do what they did. If you were caught in a life-threatening situation one day, would you be able to cut a part of yourself off and leave it behind in order to go on living? That's one of those things we never truly know, until we actually face that situation.

But this isn't JUST about an arm or an eye; we have stumbling blocks in our PERSONAL lives too – things that keep us from being HAPPY, that KEEP us from having peace in our lives, things that get in the way of our relationship with Christ.

And like Aron Ralston's arm, those stumbling blocks can TRAP us. But unfortunately, MANY of us would rather KEEP OUR stumbling block, and slowly kill ourselves, poison our spirit, because of it.

As it turns out, this TOO IS life or death. Jesus wants us to LIVE, he wants us to live with HIM FOREVER. He's given us the way, he's shown us the path, he even guides us on the journey. But we put stumbling blocks in the way, of OURSELVES AND OTHERS. If we can't get past them, eventually we lose our way.

Jesus uses this disturbing imagery because stumbling blocks take all KINDS of forms. It makes us ask ourselves, would I have the COURAGE to give up... a grudge, or a prejudice, or an obsession, or an addiction, or a habit, or an attitude? What if my LIFE were at stake? Or would I slowly KILL myself to KEEP it? Your life IS at stake.

In the medical world, most of us today accept the idea that the whole body is worth more than any of its individual parts. If a troublesome organ disrupts our life or threatens our very existence, we eliminate it in order to save everything else. When a gall bladder or appendix is so badly diseased that it gives us no peace, we cut it out. When a hand or foot is diseased beyond help, we amputate – with regret, of course; but we operate on the assumption that it's better to enter life WITHOUT the disease than NOT to live at ALL. We understand the principle involved.

It's the SAME principle in the spiritual realm. If it causes you to sin, if it causes you to stumble, cut it off, tear it out.

And it takes no less courage, NO LESS courage to cut out those old hurts, or habits, or attitudes, or destructive thoughts or actions that we have lived with for SO LONG, than it does to cut off your OWN ARM.

But when Jesus says those words, he doesn't hand you a knife; he hands you 2 nails. And he doesn't make you cut it out yourself; he invites you to say, "Jesus, TAKE this from me. I can't do this anymore. I don't want this anymore."

And then he stretches out HIS ARM, and his other arm, and he TAKES it – he takes the NAILS FOR you. He dies, so that you can live. Look up there at his cross, and listen as he says, "It is finished." Amen.