

Spiritual Surgery

Mark 9:38-48

September 30, 2012

I.

As you can see from your service bulletins, Deacon Dave was scheduled to preach today. But we are glad that he's not, aren't we? As most of you now know, Dave has had a successful kidney transplant that should substantially improve his health and offer him a quality of life far better than that which he was facing.

I have spoken with Dave and Mary, and they are optimistic. Things look rosier for them than they did a few days ago. Dave expects to come home this week and begin the long process that will be required for his body to adjust to his new kidney.

And so I ask us to bow our heads as we pray for Dave. Lord, we thank you for our brother and your servant, Dave, and for making this opportunity available for him. We ask that you be with him in this difficult time. Heal him, and restore him to health, Lord. Let his body completely accept this new kidney, and hasten his complete recovery with no unexpected problems.

We also pray for Mary, that you will be with her, and strengthen and comfort her as she ministers to Dave and supports him as he recovers. Ease her burdens, relieve her anxieties, and help her to do the work that she now is called to do. In Jesus' name, Amen.

And Dave's opportunity came very suddenly. He received a call from the hospital in Jackson advising that a kidney was available, and he had to leave right then. And I know that Dave already had his bags packed just in case such a call came through.

There has to be a sermon somewhere in there, doesn't there? Perhaps it's about responding right away to a blessing that God holds out to us. Or perhaps it's about being ready to go when God speaks.

But perhaps it's about how surgery can help us to lead more abundant lives. Part of today's Gospel makes that specific point. Let's look at it.

II.

Jesus offered some really drastic and gruesome surgical instructions in today's reading. He said that if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off because that is better than going to hell. Then, as if that was not enough, he said if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out, because you are better off with one eye in the kingdom than with two eyes in hell.

And in Matthew's version of this story, the part about plucking out your eye if it causes you to sin comes right after the part where Jesus said that anyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart (5:28-29). If we took all that literally, there would be a booming business in eye patches.

So why did Jesus make demands in such harsh terms? Couldn't he just have told a parable, or said what he wanted to say a little less graphically?

Well, as a way to begin, I can stand here today and tell you that it will not cost you an arm and a leg to get to heaven. And notice that I just used a metaphor about body parts in that last sentence. Jesus used the same kind of metaphorical image when he identified body parts with sin, and then said those body parts, by which he meant sins, must be cut away.

And perhaps Jesus used shocking images with the disciples in order to drive his point home. During this part of Mark's Gospel, he proclaimed the coming of God's kingdom. This was no small thing. In fact, the coming of the kingdom was then and remains now the most significant event that could possibly occur in the history of the world.

And Jesus was not talking about changing our lives in minor ways. He did not live among us just to offer a few helpful hints about self-improvement. The kingdom of God is not just a little program to encourage people to be nicer to each other. And you don't create enemies who want to crucify you merely because you are suggesting a little change here, or a little change there.

No, Jesus was talking about a hugely different new world. He was revealing a new reality beyond the comprehension of most people at the time. Perhaps Jesus felt the need to use radical and grisly imagery to get peoples' attention and make his point.

III.

And the point was that the kingdom is for the faithful, and faithful living can be difficult. Satan does not tempt us with unpleasant things, and sometimes we can become very attached to those things we are called to give up if we are to lead the lives that Jesus wants for us.

There is no doubt that today's gospel is about sin, and in some churches it is not fashionable to talk about sin. Some of the more modern translations of this reading do not even talk about sinning, and instead water it down and describe it as stumbling.

But no matter what we call it, we know that real sin comes from the heart and mind, not the hands and feet. Sin, which is separation from God, comes from those attitudes, and practices, and habits that we know or suspect are wrong, but that we do anyway. These are the things today's gospel calls us to cut out. Jesus' language is symbolic, but the meaning is real.

IV.

If Jesus were here today perhaps he would use different terminology. In first century Palestine amputation was a common medical treatment for healing. It often was necessary to remove an infected part of the body to save an earthly life just as Jesus was speaking symbolically of doing the same to save our eternal lives.

Today there are other options. Rather than cutting something off perhaps Jesus could have referred to more modern medical techniques. What about righteous radiation to destroy harmful practices, or a blessed bypass to avoid them? While the metaphors would be different, the meaning would be the same. The condition of sin, if treated successfully, would be gone.

So what are these conditions we are called to cut out as we seek God's kingdom? Perhaps we can search ourselves and ask God in prayer to help. Remember the Psalms where David said, "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" (139:23-24)

And when we look inwardly we might find lingering resentment against someone that the enemy uses to keep us from a full relationship with God. Perhaps there might be unforgiveness, or envy, or pride, or an excessive interest in material things that gets in the way of faith or stewardship. And maybe there are temptations we seem unable to resist.

Whatever they might be, they are the things that Jesus calls us to renounce, to remove from ourselves, and to cut out. They were described as hands, feet, and eyes in this first century Gospel, but they could be anything in today's world. They are different for each of us, and each of us probably has some idea of what they are.

The problem is in doing something about it. Sometimes it can be difficult, especially where addictions are involved. And sometimes we don't succeed and have to try again. But today's Gospel calls us to persevere. And if we call upon the Holy Spirit we can be empowered to do what otherwise might seem impossible.

V.

I would like to conclude with an example. I once accompanied a friend to an open Alcoholics Anonymous meeting to offer support. Toward the end of the meeting the leader announced it was time for progress pins to be distributed.

The first pins went to all who had been clean and sober for thirty days. Then came pins for those who had been clean and sober for six months. After that, people who had been clean and sober for one year received their pins.

Then, with seriousness and solemnity, he announced it was time for the most important pins of all. He asked anyone to come forward who had been clean and sober for twenty-four hours.

A journey begins with the first step. And today's gospel tells us that if there are things within us that interfere with having a holy relationship with God, now is the time to start. And the first twenty-four hours could be the hardest.

But we are not called to do it alone. The church is here as our companion. Dealing with the temptations and distractions alone can be difficult. Dealing with them together, in the church, with each other, led by the Holy Spirit, is a lot easier.

Jesus spoke to the disciples as a group, and he speaks to us as a group. Here, in the church, in community with others, we find God's grace and the way to a holy life. I know that is what we seek at St. Thomas, and I pray that together, as we follow him, we will continue to know God's peace and the abundant lives that are before us. *Amen.*