

**18 Pentecost**  
**September 26, 2021**

**Sermon by The Rev. Mal Jopling**

“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 go to hell. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out.”

Talking about cutting off limbs and tearing out eyeballs and being thrown into hell is a pretty disturbing way to begin a beautiful Fall Sunday morning. I wonder how many of us would pick Mark 9:38-50 as our favorite Bible verse. Where is the hope—where is the Good News in Jesus’ words today.

Last week we heard the story of Jesus taking a small child in his arms and saying, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name, welcomes me.” That’s the Jesus we prefer—a gentle, loving, and compassionate Jesus. Jesus loves the little children and so do we. Today we have body parts, hellfire, and damnation—images that are difficult to understand and images that make us squeamish and uncomfortable.

What are we to make of these troubling words and graphic images? Surely, Jesus is not talking about a literal amputation: plucking out eyes and cutting off hands and feet. What is Jesus trying to explain to his disciples—what is Jesus calling us to understand and to do with these harsh words?

Tragically, over the last number of years, we have heard or read far too many stories of our men and women veterans returning home from war horribly wounded and maimed. We hear them relate how unbelievably difficult those injuries have been for them and how those wounds forever changed their lives. I cannot even begin to imagine how I would react to such injuries and loss. The thought of losing a hand or a foot or an eye is terrifying; it’s just too hard to even think about.

But maybe that is precisely the point Jesus is trying to make. His tough words and graphic images are meant to say to us that being a Christian disciple means we must make a serious commitment and it means there will be many difficult choices to be made on our journey in following Christ.

Jesus’ words are a call for us to examine the quality and the depth of our discipleship. It is a powerful metaphor! Jesus is saying to you and me, “Whatever it is, no matter what the cost, whatever is getting in the way of your devotion to me and to my call on your life has got to go! It is as simple as that. It is as difficult as that.

Whatever it is that keeps us from being totally and passionately devoted to Jesus and his mission must be discarded and left behind. We must cut away and pluck out everything that stands in the way of Christ and his claim on our lives. And the “cutting” and the “plucking” can be painful and difficult....

It can often seem more painful and difficult than any physical amputation we might experience.

What are some of the things getting in the way of our becoming more faithful followers of Jesus? Is it our prejudicial and judgmental way of viewing others—those whose lifestyles differ from ours, or those who look or talk differently from us? In today’s divisive environment, is it our arrogance and feeling of superiority toward those whose political views clash with our own? Is it our prejudice and self-righteous judgment that needs to be “plucked out” of our lives?

Perhaps we need to “amputate” the selfishness that controls our lives. Maybe we need to remove the apathy that causes us to ignore the needs of others. Or is it our pride, our egos, our hatreds, or our resentments that clutter our lives that need to be cut away. Imperfect as we are, we know all too well that there are many things that can get in the way of our being faithful followers of Jesus.

Ridding ourselves of prejudice, selfishness, hatred, pride, and resentment does not come easily. Over time those things become a part of us—almost like a hand or an eye. Removing them can be painful, difficult, and costly.

It is because there is a part of us that doesn’t want to let go of those things any more than we want to cut off our hand or lose an eye....

When someone betrays us, or deeply hurts us, or threatens our perceptions of how the world should be, we feel we have every right to resent them and to strike back. No one wants to appear weak or taken advantage of.

We resent those whom we perceive to be threatening something we consider ours. It’s my country, it’s my neighborhood, it’s my job, it’s my money, and it is my time. Why do I need to share with others all that I have worked hard for and what I consider to be my own personal possession?

Old hatreds, prejudices, resentments, selfishness, and apathies do not go away easily or without cost. It takes courage and determination to “cut” them out of our lives. It can be painful, and it may take a lifetime to accomplish.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, renowned pastor, author, and martyr, wrote the spiritual classic, *The Cost of Discipleship*. For Bonhoeffer, the cost was his very life, executed in a Nazi concentration camp for his opposition to Adolf Hitler and the horror of his regime. Bonhoeffer knew that following Jesus comes with a cost. The night before he was hanged, he told a fellow prisoner, “This is the end. For me, it is the beginning of life.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood what Jesus is demanding from his followers. If we want to be Jesus’ disciple, if we want to bear the name “Christian,” if we want to begin experiencing a new way of living, then we are going to have to be willing to rid ourselves of anything and everything that separates us from doing God’s will and to let God’s purpose become our purpose.

To be free, some things have to go. Some things have to die. Some things have to be cut away. The Good News in these hard sayings of Jesus is that we do not have to do the letting go, or the dying or the cutting away on our own. In fact, on our own it is impossible to rid ourselves of those things that keep us from wholehearted devotion to God. I love the way the morning resolve in the *Forward Day by Day* devotional puts it. “As I cannot in my own strength do this, nor even with a hope of success attempt it, I look to thee, O Lord God my Father, in Jesus my Savior, and ask for the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

It is only through God’s grace, God’s love, and God’s forgiveness that we are able to cut away and discard those things that separate us from God and one another and allow us to be made whole. What part of your life needs to be cut away? Offer to God all the obstacles that are preventing you from being shaped into the child of God for which you are intended. Offer up all those amputated resentments, hatreds, prejudices and selfishness and you will discover not a terrible wound but the beginning of new life, new health, new growth, and new joy. Amen.