

Pentecost 17 B 2009 Mark 9:38-50

42 “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me **to stumble**. Your English text says sin, but the word used is scandalizo, from this we get the word “scandalize.” It means cause to stumble or fall. In 1 Cor. 1: 23 The apostle Paul uses this Greek word to describe a barrier to faith, a stumbling block. So, Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to be scandalized and stumble. It would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. If you want to get a good visual image of what millstones can do, then watch the film Amistad. In this film hundreds of pounds of stones were thrown off a ship dragging people across the deck and then overboard and into the ocean. These sound like harsh words. You'd like to think Jesus is certainly being hyperbolic. He's overstating the situation...right? He can't be serious, can he? Dying a terrible death plummeting to the bottom of the sea, really? **It is harsh**. Our executions in the US are far more humane than this. But Jesus gives no indication that this is anything but a sober warning. So listen again. He's saying “Whoever causes one of these little ones **who believe in me** to [be scandalized], to lose their way and no longer believe, in this case it would be better for him to suffer a horrible death. Why does he say this? God's children are precious to him. He desires all people to be saved. He is protective of his children as a momma bear is protective of her cubs. He wants nothing in the way. And if you are at the bottom of the sea you won't be causing anyone to lose his faith. If someone loses his faith because you misrepresent Jesus, the far better alternative would be for you not to exist at all.

43 And if your **hand** causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life **crippled** than with two hands to go to hell, to the **unquenchable fire**. Often when we hear these words from Jesus we assume that it is just an image to catch us off guard. It doesn't even occur to us that Jesus is serious. But this might just indicate that we aren't very serious about sin. We think, "Jesus paid for my sins, it's all done and now I don't have to worry about that any more". Maybe if we saw the gravity of our actions then we would be able to hear and understand this dire warning. After all, what is better, to have one hand or to go to hell? Losing one hand is a whole lot better than being in eternal torment. Right? This is a no brainer. Jesus is not overstating his case. He's dead serious. 45 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. 47 And if your **eye causes you to sin, tear it out**. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 48 ‘where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’ The idea that Jesus is trying to get across is that sin is serious. Your hand and your foot and your eye are all very important. Do you know any one missing one of these? Then you know how serious this is. But there is something far more important. Having a right relationship with God. Being reconciled to our Father in Heaven. Our sin separates us from God. Our choices and actions separate us from each other.

With our hands we take what does not belong to us. We touch what we have no business touching. We lash out at others in violence. With our feet, we go places we don't belong, we wander off and get lost. With our eyes, we look down on others, we long for and scheme to get more than we have and we allow our eyes to be filled with desire. More than that we use our tongues to brag about our achievements hoping to boost ourselves in society, often cutting down others in the process. We speak cutting remarks that hurt and crush others, we talk about others behind their backs and if we come clean, then we're going to admit that we lie, false words come out of our mouths.

So let's look at this again. Do you sin with your right eye? Tear it out. Did that stop your sin? Oh that's right you've still got the left one. Well the left one will have to go too. What about your

hands? Same thing not just your right, Both of them, gone. Still sinning? Your tongue will have to be cut out. Good now we're making some progress. At this point you are beginning to look like **a bloody, blind, crippled mess**. But even with all of that, are you now sinless? Nope, You're still not righteous? Mutilation is not the answer. Don't cut off your hand, or your foot, don't pluck out your eye don't cut yourself at all. It won't help the problem. Why not? Sin doesn't start here in my hand or my tongue or even my eye, does it? Where does sin start? Two chapters earlier, in Mark 7 Jesus says ²¹...from within, out of men's **hearts**, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²²greed...The problem is the heart. So sticking with Jesus' instructions, if your heart causes you to sin, then...? do you sin with your heart? what is the answer. Want to stop your sin? Then cut out your heart. (Then you'll be dead - but at least you'll no longer sin.) Death. Death is the only way to make you stop sinning.

But there is more to the answer. Who was it that only used his hands to serve others? Who was it that with his eyes saw all of the riches of the world but did not give in to greed? Who was it that was tempted in every way as we are but was without sin? And yet King David tells us in psalm 22 his hands and feet were crippled "they have pierced my hands and feet." The prophet Isaiah tells us he was cut off, far more than his hands and feet - his whole life. He was cut off from the land of the living. He never led anyone astray, far from that, he is the lamp unto my feet and the light unto my path. He himself is the road. He is the way the truth and the life. He brings our feet to follow paths of righteousness, yet the greatest of all mill stones, the sin of the world, was hung around his neck as he plunged to the depths of hell. The one who truly had a pure heart was cut to the heart by the spear of a roman soldier. Jesus was a bloody gory mess, and that is how our sin has been dealt with. Not by you mutilating your self. Your old dead diseased heart does need to be dealt with, so God promised, by the prophet Ezekiel ²⁶ I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. You don't fix yourself, Jesus promises Behold I make all things new! He will make you new. By his wounds we are healed. That is pretty good news for all of us. In Jesus' name