

## *Your Eyes, Hands and Feet*

Mark 9:38-50

Pentecost 17B

SEP 27 2009

There used to be a phrase "saved by the bell", which meant that in high school, having not studied the material, the teacher turns to you with the difficult question, but before you have to admit that you don't know the answer, the bell rings, signaling the end of class. What a relief!

Back in August, as many of you know, I came very close to having surgery. The whole emergency room staff at Park Ridge was convinced that my appendix needed to be removed. So near the end of the day, they checked my pulse, took a final blood sample, and hooked me up to the IV. Just before I was rolled down the hall to the operating room, Dr. Watkins, the surgeon, took a look at my chart, poked me in my stomach a bit, and astounded me by saying that I didn't need surgery after all.

It turns out that I had a small abdominal muscle tear in the vicinity of the appendix, and that tear could be treated without surgery by avoiding lifting and taking ibuprofen. And today I stand before you nearly completely healed, and without having to have surgery. What a relief!

The reason I mention this personal story is to get you to feel my intense relief that I didn't need surgery. When I tell my story in the most exaggerated, dramatic form, I can tell you how the medical staff was surrounding my bed sharpening their knives and grinning and drooling at me with a bloodthirsty expression. What a relief that they had to put the knives away!

The text before us this morning is a very difficult one, not only because the imagery is very graphic, but because if read incorrectly the text would pull you down and defeat you. And we can't let that happen, because the Biblical message is always one of hope, so we need to dig much deeper into the meaning.

In 9<sup>th</sup> grade Social Studies I learned about the first law-giver, a Babylonian king by the name of Hammurabi. He had his laws carved into a stone that was actually unearthed by archaeologists in 1901. The laws of Hammurabi are best known for their retaliatory nature, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth". If you wrongly poke out another's eye, or break another's tooth, the law prescribes that your eye be blinded, and a tooth extracted. These are the first human laws in recorded history. To some extent, they continue to be found in our laws, not the

dismemberment part, but the idea that if I spray paint graffiti on your wall, the court will require me to clean it up at my own expense.

What Jesus says is actually more graphic. Not cut off your hand because you hurt someone, but cut it off BEFORE you hurt someone. If you read this passage literally it would have you, because everyone knows that you are a terrible sinner, expecting them to come for you to pluck out your eye, or cut off your hand or foot, or hang that two ton millstone around your neck. If your hand causes you to sin? Cut it off? If your foot causes you to stumble? Cut it off! If your eye looks at something that will tempt you to sin, pluck it out! And not only that, if your sin involves leading others astray then you should have that giant two ton millstone hung around your neck and be thrown into the sea.

But if this reading has you sharpening your surgical knife or rolling out a large millstone to go to work on your sinful neighbor, you've got it all wrong. The text is not proposing barbaric measures for excising sinful body parts, the point is to feel the relief that God is good, God is loving, God is graceful, and God is far more interested in rescuing us than destroying us.

You have read a little bit ahead of this passage to understand this point, in chapter 10, verse 26 and 27. After hearing a long series of very hard teachings about marriage, the treatment of children, and what to do with wealth, the disciples are overwhelmed. Who can possibly live according to Jesus' teachings? Who can live according to these incredibly high standards? As the scripture reads, in exasperation the disciples ask "Who then can be saved?"

Jesus' answer contains the main point after all of these difficult teachings: "For people it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible". In the end, it's not just about what you can do in your life, it's what God can do.

This is a most basic aspect of Christian faith. God appears to be a judge, ready to sentence us to terrible consequences for even the tiniest sins, but in Jesus Christ we learn that God is far more interested in rescuing us, saving us, redeeming us. Where we expected a giant millstone to pull us under, in Jesus God has sent a life preserver. Instead of the sharp knives, God sends a surgeon who says that the planned surgery will not happen!