

**Brothers and Sisters, Grace to you and peace, from God our Father  
and from our Lord and Saviors Jesus Christ... Amen**

After reading the Gospel lesson this morning, I can imagine my Swedish Grandmother exclaim, "Uff Da." What is all this stuff about being thrown into the sea with a mill stone hung around the neck, the cutting off of hands and feet and tearing out the eyes?

If we were serious about cutting off our sinning parts, we'd all be in rough shape. A month ago, our Gospel lesson a couple chapters earlier was very clear that all evil intentions come from the heart. Now the heart is not something we probably want to dismember. So, what is Jesus really saying here? I think this text is not so much about dismembering body parts, as much as it's about the hard work of re-membering, re-membering one to another. Let's take a closer look.

At the beginning of our gospel lesson, John says to Jesus, "we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." In some ancient manuscripts and different translations, the words and meaning of "not following us," is doubled up.

For instance, the King James Version of this same verse reads, "we saw one casting out devils in thy name, and he followeth not us: and we forbad him, because he followeth not us." This doubling up of the words, "followeth not us," is overemphasized; it gives the reader a feeling that John is trying a little bit too hard to make his point.

The definition for the Greek word "to follow" in this verse means to "join one as a disciple, become or be his disciple." So, even while this unnamed person was able to perform deeds of power in Jesus' name, in John's mind, this guy certainly didn't measure up to the category of disciple. This guy was pushing all of John's buttons... And so, John assumes that it is his job to stop this person, "he's not one of us!"

Have you ever felt left out, or kicked out of a group? Remember when we were kids and choosing up teams, I always felt sorry for those people who were the last to get chosen... I trust all of us, at some time; have felt the sting of being judged and excluded.

Quick story... When I was a freshman in college, I stayed in a dorm and became good friends with the other guys on the floor. We had our own intermural sports teams, we did a lot of shenanigans...

It was during that freshman year when Kris and I started dating. As the school year progressed, I spent less and less time with the guys, and more and more time with Kris. I suppose my allegiances changed. As this transition occurred I started sensing that things between my friends and me were different.

My roommate was a friend since childhood. I couldn't quite figure out how or why, but somehow there was distance between us. I remember one evening in particular. We hadn't spent much time together, and I suggested we go out, like old times to catch up. He declined; I begged him to talk with me about what was going on. He remained cold and aloof.

Our college had a great varsity basketball team. One weekend the team was playing in the final four for the division-three National Championship. It was a big deal! The tournament was in the quad cities, everyone from school was going. One of the guys reserved a couple rooms at a nearby motel and we all pitched in.

Incredible as it turned out, we won the National Championship. It was an amazing experience! That night we celebrated late into the night. I had to get up early, so eventually I excused myself and went to the adjacent room to catch some sleep. The door between the rooms was partly open and it was hard to fall sleep because of all the noise.

The party droned on, and then suddenly out of the blue, I heard my friends talking about me. Someone commented that I wasn't one of the gang anymore. Another voice actually had a name for people like me. I couldn't believe my ears! I felt hurt, dismembered and somehow ashamed.

It was a devastating thing to hear and for the rest of that school year, I felt excluded and shunned. I had been thinking about transferring to a different school, and after that experience my decision was made. These friends had become a stumbling block for me.

I think that as Christians we are often guilty of judging one another. Whether we intend to or not, we often see people in terms of some degree of "righteousness." I'm sure you've all heard the term "good Christian." I'll be honest, that makes me squirm a little bit, because the inference is that there are people who are "real Christians" and then those that are "not Christians."

Many years ago when I was at the Shepherd's Center, I remember a conversation between one woman who was setting up a display of nativity sets, and another woman who came in and asked her why she collected them, "You're Catholic, right, are you really a Christian?" The poor woman didn't know how to respond... I came to her rescue by changing the subject. And I felt so badly...

Jesus had a word for this, he calls it being a stumbling block. When our own tribal self-righteousness is setting up boundaries and barriers, and we start excluding one another...

Jesus noticed how John had become a stumbling block, and Jesus said to him, "Do not stop that guy; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me." Jesus reverses the direction of John's excluding behavior. Instead of being complicit with John, Jesus goes in the opposite direction. Jesus expands the definition of a follower; Jesus finds a way to include this person.

And then to reinforce this change in direction, Jesus says, "Whoever is not against us is for us." Jesus opens the possibilities for inclusion so wide it simply boggles our mind. This is hard for us judgmental sinners to imagine, isn't it?

And I think that's exactly the point. It's hard for us to imagine, because it's exactly our problem, it exposes our own judgmental and excluding nature. We tend to think dualistically, we want boundaries and barriers; we want to know who's in and who's out. But Jesus tears down boundaries and barriers. Jesus finds a way to include people. Jesus finds ways for people to fit in... This text is about inclusion and belonging.

Jesus even goes further, he said, "If your hand or foot causes you to stumble, cut it off." Our hands may represent our work and our doings, our feet may represent our travels and journeys, and our eyes may represent how we see things-- our perspective.

By using these metaphors, Jesus is saying that in all that we do, be careful not to exclude people. And all together as the body of Christ, when we judge and exclude others, we are also judging and excluding Jesus, himself... The violent actions of cutting off and tearing out, are meant for us to consider how painful it is when we exclude others, as well as a reminder that it is also painful for us to change our ways.

Transformation is always difficult... First it requires us to see our own sin-- to be aware of our own judgmental, and dismembering ways. Secondly it requires us to listen and to see the other person differently; to change our perspective. When we engage the process of reconciliation, we are in a very real way seeing the other person differently, in effect we are tearing out an eye.

Several years after college, I got together with my childhood friend, the same friend that I had to beg to talk with me many years prior. We were reminiscing and the topic about my transferring to a different college came up. I started running through my litany of rehearsed reasons.

As my friend listened, his posture shriveled up, he put one hand to his face to shield his eyes, and then he admitted feeling guilty for disowning me among our friends. He was sorry. His admission was genuine and it was plain that his conscience had troubled him a long time.

He had the courage to tear out an eye; he dared to see his own wounding and dismembering actions. And rather than being thrown into the fires of guilt, where the worm never dies, he had the courage and wisdom to seek forgiveness. This can only be the miraculous work of God-- two old friends, through thick and thin, and still learning to love and forgive.

The good news this morning is that through Christ, reconciliation happens. In all the ways we exclude others, God is bringing back into the fold. It is about God coming to rescue us from our death-dealing ways. It is about God changing exclusion into inclusion. It is about deeply belonging. It's about bringing people together.

It's also about listening so deeply that our hearts are changed and it becomes possible to love people we don't like, even our enemies. It's about being the body of Christ all together, being made whole, Jesus is the unity amidst all our differences.

God is good, His promises are sure, and through the cross we bear to love our neighbor, God indeed changes death into life.

Amen.