

Sermon Prepared by The Rev. Matt Rhodes for
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Forest, Virginia
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 26, 2021

(Mark 9:38-50)

I'm pretty sure it goes without saying, but I'm going to say it anyway: *this* is a difficult passage from Mark.

We as people of the Word come to the scriptures seeking good news. The words we hear from Jesus this time seem to be anything but good – at least on the surface. Millstones hung around the neck. Hands and feet cut off. Eyes plucked out. Put yourselves in the place of the disciples and you would find these to be very difficult and painful words to hear, especially since they were spoken by their beloved rabbi, teacher and friend.

We should remember that these first followers of Jesus had already given up a great deal when invited to follow him in his ministry: their work; their families; their place in their communities; their anonymity. Giving up everything for what to them was at the outset an unknown quantity might at first have seemed to be a difficult decision to make. However, there was something about Jesus ... some indescribable quality ... that made it easy for the 12. For others, the pull to follow Jesus was much more difficult. In Luke, for instance, a rich young ruler asked Jesus how to attain eternal life and was told that he needed to sell *everything* and distribute it to the poor ... and only then could he follow him. In that instance, rather than responding with joy the young ruler responded with sadness, “for he was very rich.”¹

So to hear Jesus saying these words to the disciples – hearing him tell them to sacrifice any parts of their bodies that cause them to stumble – was undoubtedly shocking. They had, after all, already given up seemingly everything; now this? They likely didn't understand that Jesus was telling them that in order to preserve the community there may be a time when they would have to “sacrifice their own wellness.”²

The particular choice of body parts to which he referred in this passage would have certainly been very familiar to anyone living in the world of his day. Injuries to hands, feet and eyes were common to those working in farming and agriculture or engaged in crafts trades, such as carpentry.³ But unlike any such injury a farmer or craftsman might have received, which would have severely inhibited their ability to continue in their work, we are told that our journeys will be made easier when the

¹ Luke 18:23 (NRSV).

² Joyce Ann Mercer in *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*, p. 294.

³ Mark 9:42-50, in *New Interpreters Bible Commentary, Vol. 8: Matthew and Mark*, p. 640.

things causing us to stumble on those journeys are removed ... cut off ... plucked out.

Made easier? That seems counterintuitive ... until you consider those things to which our eyes and feet lead us. In a commentary on this passage, for instance, the theologian Mary Jane Kerr Cornell discusses how feet move us towards a destination. In that context, losing a foot removes that thing that pulls us off of God's path and puts our personal goals in direct conflict with God's goals for us.⁴ Eyes are the things that respond to the things "seeking to draw our attention" away from God – the distractions of everyday life.⁵

But Cornell also brings up something else, an idea rooted in the reality of differing positions and points of view. She discusses how people often perceive these differences as the stumbling blocks placed in our paths by those with whom we disagree. But that perception, she contends, comes from the fact that people often "too narrowly define God's truth."⁶

At the point of that narrow definition we discover there is a second important ingredient to all of this. As followers of Christ, as believers living in community, there is another step we can and should take beyond eliminating the things that cause us to stumble. Even as we pick ourselves up from stumbling, we should lift others as well. What Cornell says are often narrow points of view or narrow definitions of God's truth should not be barriers, but rather sparks for enlightened conversation. Instead of being a family of God whose members bicker and try to find ways to cause one another to stumble, we should be mindful of our neighbors – and love them – by keeping them up rather than standing by and watching them fall.

The path on which we each walk is difficult and uneven. There are enough challenges in this life without people pushing one another down as they pass. As we look at the "little ones who believe"⁷ in Jesus, trying not to cause them to stumble and indeed helping them rise when they fall, aren't we practicing real discipleship? Isn't that one of the things we're called to do?

With this in mind, I look at each of you and I have hope ... and I pray that you have that same hope when you look at one another and at your neighbors, here and in the world beyond the serpentine wall. I look at you and see not feet extended to trip others, but hands extended to steady them on their journey. I look at you and see the people who, similar to the disciples to whom Jesus was speaking, give for the sake of preserving the community. I look at you and see children of God who are

⁴ Mary Jane Kerr Cornell, "Mark 9:42-50 – Pastoral Perspective." *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark* (Kindle edition).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Mark 9:42 (NRSV).

ready to help the other little ones who believe by helping build up their faith when their faith is shattered.

Nothing must be sacrificed if we follow the admonition of Jesus. Don't risk your hands, feet and eyes by wandering away from Jesus or turning your gaze away from what ... and who ... we are called to serve. Pray for strength and wisdom so that we don't stumble. Pray for strength and wisdom so that we don't cause others to stumble.

Bear the name of Christ.