

Mark 9:38-50

38 John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.' 39 But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. 40 Whoever is not against us is for us. 41 For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. 42 'If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. 43 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 to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. 45 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 to be thrown into hell. 47 And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, 48 where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. 49 'For everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.'

If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off
If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off
If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out.

Well, as hard as these words seem to be,
if we take five minutes to think about them,
it looks like this is just the right thing to do.
Imagine for a minute you are found with an inoperable tumor,
in your hand, in your leg, in your eye.
And there's no cure for that.

What would you do?

Well, I guess that as terrible and as painful as it is,
we would have the member removed, before the cancer spreads out.
I mean: Who is ready to die, just to keep looking good?

Well, you would think.

Last time I had a blood exam, as my blood sugar was a little high,
my doctor told me this strange story.
He told me that luckily diabetes tests have become much more accurate than what they used to be.
Instead of telling how high is your blood sugar on the very day of the exam,
it can now tell what average level it has been for the last three months.
Before that, my doctor said, some people could just cut off on sugar for three days,
pass the test, and then die of the consequences of diabetes six months later.
And so they did.

Well, I guess today Jesus is telling his disciples just what a good doctor would tell us.
If you have something going on, you need to take care of it.
Quickly. Instead of hiding and covering up.

Because our story today is not about covering up demons,
it is about casting out demons.

And the disciples, as you may know, are not very good at casting demons.
At the beginning of this very chapter of Mark,
a man comes to see Jesus to ask him to cast out a demon from his son's body
because, so he says, the disciples had tried already, but were unable to do it.
Well, this episode may explain why the disciples get angry at the new kid on the block
who seems so gifted at it.
My guess is that the disciples,
who as we know from last week's lesson are already worried about greatness,
are no so upset today at what might dishonor God,
but they are upset because the man is able to do a better job than they do.

As so Jesus,
after he defends the man, has to explain
once again
How it all work. What it is like to cast out demons.
With his metaphor of the hand, the leg and the eye,
I think that what Jesus is trying to tell the disciples, is:
How can you pretend to cast other people's demons,
if you are unable to cast your own demons?

How can you pretend to cast out people's demons, if you are unable to cast out your own demons?

Oh, the disciples' demons do not wear pointed horns and red capes.
Their demons are named: pride, jealousy, discrimination, judgment, condescension.
The disciples look down on somebody's else actions,
when they'd better look inside their own souls.

Well, I guess we all do that at some point.
It is so easy to see what's wrong in people.
And I mean it: it is easy to see what's wrong in people.
But we should know better,
and start examining our own souls.

It is hard to see our own demons- not that they do not exist -
but because of the covering up we all do.
In front of God, in front of others but mostly: in front of ourselves.
Not that we deliberately want to hide
But because we want so much to be healthy, we want so much to be good.
But as the doctor with the patient having diabetes, Jesus tells us:
“If you don't watch out, the covering up is going to kill you”

The problem with the worst sins is that they grow like little tumors.

As the beginning, you won't even notice.
And so of course, it is not that serious.
It is a thought, a movement of jealousy, of desire,
a few words, a joke, a judgment
but then it's the beginning of an act, the act itself, and then the same act over and over again.

It can take all its time,
but as surely as a tumor will spread out,
as surely as the cancer ends up in the whole body,
the sin ends up messing our whole life
if we don't take care of it.

Just think: addictions, drugs, alcoholism
but also adultery, child abuse, domestic violence and all the lies that go with them.
We need to deal with it before it destroys our lives.

Most of the time, we choose to ignore
not to worry too much – maybe it's nothing, we say.
Maybe I am just making that up.
But the truth is: as having a leg or a hand or an eye removed,
it is just too much to deal with it.
And we start to feel very powerless and very miserable.
Because, seriously, now the waters are up to the neck, what are we gonna do?
Well, it's interesting Jesus picks this metaphor of having a member removed,
because at the time, if you missed a hand or a leg,
surely you wouldn't be admitted in the Temple.
You're not pure enough to make a sacrifice.
Almost not pure enough to live in society.

With Jesus we enter a whole new economy.
Because God is not interested in who we pretend to be,
God is interested in who we are
Even if we think this person is a terrible person.

Because even if the whole society is going to reject us
if we lack an arm, a leg or an eye
God will surely welcome us
Because we will be our true selves, not wearing a mask anymore.
Pretending everything is fine, when everything is wrong.

So how do we do that?
How do we cast out demons?
Well, at the beginning of our chapter Jesus answers the question after he cures the boy
He says: "This kind of demon cannot be driven out, except by prayer"

Prayer, it all comes to that
Not praying with a book, reciting words, but praying with our heart.
Again and again – as long as we need to.
Acknowledging in front of God who we really are,
asking God to show us who we need to be

Confessing of ourselves, in front of God and then in front of others.

Seeking healing and reconciliation.

This is what James invites us to do today:

“Confess your sin to one another, and pray for another, so that you may be healed.”

God invites us today to wholeness.

A wholeness that isn't the wholeness of those who have eyes, hands and legs and look perfect.

It is the wholeness of those who welcome the truth,

acknowledge their brokenness

and are made new by reconciliation.

There is no way we manage any kind of work as disciples if we don't do that.

To be a disciple, it is not enough to be a follower of Jesus.

There is no way we can preserve our saltiness, our fruitfulness,

if we don't put ourselves into question and cast out our own demons.

Jesus ask us not to scandalize the little ones who believe in him:

People will look at us if we act or talk in Jesus's name

They will look at us to see God at work in us.

They look at us because they seek God.

Our best testimony is not to be able to change them,

Our best testimony is about being able to change ourselves - with God's help. Amen.