

Sermon  
18 Pentecost—Proper 21-B-2  
St. Andrew's, Methuen  
September 26, 2021  
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Numbers 11:4-6,10-16,24-29  
Psalm 19:7-14  
James 5:13-20  
Mark 9:38-50

Jesus says, "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."

As we think about this harsh saying, we notice something strange: on one hand, **we have been properly trained not to take the first half of this literally.**

No one believes Jesus is instructing the church to provide butcher knives, so we can dismember ourselves when we fall short of perfection.

You can go to the most rigid Fundamentalist Church today and you will NOT find a room full of severed arms and legs, and mason jars filled with eyeballs.

Jesus is speaking metaphorically.

But those same churches, as well as some of the churches we were raised in, believe Jesus is describing a literal hell as a place of eternal conscious torment. For more read Rob Bell's [Love Wins](#)

Yet, the Greek word translated hell is "Gehenna", which is a valley south of Jerusalem where child sacrifice used to be practiced in olden days but in Jesus' day is a smoldering garbage dump, as well as a metaphor for judgment after death.

I certainly do not believe the God and Father of Jesus creates human beings as finite and fallible and then sends us to eternal conscious torment for being finite and fallible.

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I believe Jesus is speaking metaphorically about the cost of choosing to live without God and that there is plenty of evidence: **what white America did to Black Africans or what Nazi Germany did to Jews and homosexuals was a living hell.**

**Today, however, I want us to look into the reality of the smoldering garbage dump living inside each of us. For the more clearly we see how we contribute to our own inner hell, the more we can move into the light and life of the Realm of God, causing less suffering for ourselves and others.**

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**So, let's start with this recognition: that pain and suffering are not the same thing.**

Imagine one morning you're getting dressed and you whack your little toe on the edge of the bedside table. You are in serious pain. You look to see if your toe is still attached or pointing in an unnatural direction.

**That's pain.** But at that moment we have a choice: are we going to add suffering to the **pain, by blaming** your spouse for moving the table a quarter inch or blaming your mother for giving you the table or blaming God for giving you such a wretched life?

By now we're late for work so we hobble to the car and race off to work, only to end up behind a car only doing 20 miles an hour: you want to scream or ram the car.

When we believe the fiction that we will have peace on the inside when we get the good things we want and get rid of the bad things we don't want.

**Only when we're in total control will we find peace!**

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But here's the thing: That hurt toe and slow car are just events. But as we use them to add to the melodrama of our life, our suffering increases.

**Some events cause pain, but only the mind causes suffering.**

**And on those days we don't kick the table and get behind a slow driver, the voice in our head reminds us of that fight we had with our spouse 30 years ago and that negative report we got at work last week, so we can suffer all over again. We've all been there, done that, because the voice in our head keeps reminding us of all those things we want to forget.**

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**So what is Jesus telling us to do in his startling metaphor about severing limbs?**

He is telling us two things. **First**, he is telling us to pay attention because our mental habits are ruining lives—ours and others.

**Second**, he is telling us that since we are creating our own suffering, it is possible to stop creating our suffering. There is something we can do. We are not helpless victims.

What we are being called to is repentance: to change our minds so that we stop living inside the melodrama of ME and start living inside the story of the Realm of God, where we live in gratitude for the forgiveness and “healing of Christ—where, to quote Michael Singer, “no matter what happens—in our minds or in the world—we keep our hearts open to the loving energy of the Divine Flow.

**In the Divine Flow, the Holy Spirit, when we kick our toe we examine the it and take three deep breaths and ask God for healing and peace. We may thank God that we have a toe to hurt, since there are thousands of people who stepped on land minds and lost their feet.**

**By not adding to the melodrama called “woe is me”, we may have pain in our toe, but we won’t have suffering in our mind.**

If you want to learn more about this inner voice and what to do about it, I urge you to read [The Untethered Soul](#) by Michael Singer.

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**Jesus is calling us out of the suffering of our personal melodramas and into the peace and joy of being witnesses to his liberation from suffering, the peace that passes all understanding.**

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A few years ago, my daughter passed on a song called “Just be Held” by Casting Crowns that says in part:

“When you’re tired of fighting, chained by your control,  
There’s freedom in surrender, lay it down and let it go.  
So when you’re on your knees and answers seem so far away  
You’re not alone, stop holding on, and just be held.  
Your world’s not falling apart, it’s falling into place.  
You’re not alone, I’m on the throne, stop holding on and just be held.”

Jesus calls us to stop building our lives on the garbage we have stored in our minds, and instead to build our lives on Christ’s love flowing in our hearts.

He says, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.”

In every moment we have a choice: we can live in hell or we can live in heaven, but the good news is that **Christ is always choosing us**, and

therefore we have the freedom, no matter what, to never, ever close our hearts to his Love.