

In the not too distant past the church was the center of our nation's culture and it was our ethical foundation. The culture counted on the church to be its moral authority, and the church counted on culture to give it a place of prominence. Anyone who wanted to be successful in business or politics had to (at least publically) embrace the church's morals.

These days this is not the case. The core of our culture's ethics is secular humanism. Sociology is the center of our moral understanding. The church is on the sidelines at best.

I say this as an acknowledgement of reality. We could have a whole discussion about the plusses and minuses of the situation. I bring it up because it helps us engage our very troubling gospel reading for today. This is the most vivid teaching Jesus gives, "If your hand causes you to stumble cut it off; it is better to enter life maimed than have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire." Similarly, "If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off.. If you 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.”

Ouch - almost literally! What is going on here? First, Jesus is definitely using what we could call hyperbolic language. These are extreme exaggerations in order to make a point. Jesus often taught like this. Most of the parables play on exaggerations. But they are vivid. They work and we remember them.

There appear to be two levels to this teaching. One is where our minds probably go first. It is the issue of commitment. Are you a fair weather Christian or a truly committed one? Will you stick with your faith only as long as it is easy, or will you make the hard decisions that have to be made and stick to the commitments that are necessary when things get rough?

If we go back to where I began, with the church no longer in the center of culture, we find that it used to be that if you did what culture said was right you would be in good stead with Christian faith. And, if you did what the church said was right

you'd be in good stead with culture. This is not necessarily so anymore.

There are lots of things our culture says that are okay, that are not okay before God. And don't immediately jump to the hot button political issues of the day or the things we could categorize as "sexual sins". That's not what I mean. If you were here last week you might remember me talking about the underlying assumptions of our culture that God did not make you good enough, that you are somehow lacking, and you need to be more or different. That's the root of what I mean. Buck up against that and you'll discover just how out of the center of culture Christian faith really has gotten. All the headline issues are really side shows that people are manipulating for personal gain.

Pheme Perkins, commentator on Mark writes, "These sayings challenge us to examine the quality of our discipleship. Is following Christ at the core of our being, something too precious to be surrendered lightly? Or is our Christianity merely a matter of taste and convenience, something we shelve at

the slightest difficulty or inconvenience?" (New Interpreter's Bible Volume 8 Pg. 240)

To lose an arm or a leg or an eye is to lose something really important. It would have been even more so in Jesus' day when most people were farmers or tradesmen. To lose a limb would be to lose the ability to provide for yourself and your family. While Jesus is exaggerating, he wants the point to be made. There can very well be a high cost to discipleship. You may have to give up something you think is very essential to you, when in fact it is not.

As a Lutheran pastor I usually preach about God's love and grace. That is the core of our relationship with God. We do not act out of a sense of fear but out of a sense of gratitude. But we cannot forget that God is also our judge. Actions do have consequences. God is God and there is accountability. I can be as nice and sweet to my kids as I want and they'll probably turn into spoiled brats. Having consequences for their misdeeds helps them to grow and mature, and lets them know that I do really love them. God is loving, truly loving. God is not

a pushover. Martin Luther often wrote in the Small Catechism, "We should love and fear God."

The second level Jesus' teachings work at may not come to us immediately but requires a bit more thought. When we Jesus' words in their broader context we realize that they are a part of a teaching about evangelism and nurturing faith in new converts. The gospel reading starts off with the disciples telling Jesus they tried to stop someone who wasn't one of them but was using Jesus' name to cast out demons. Basically they're informing Jesus that they caught someone who was infringing on Jesus' trademark rights to his name and they didn't let him get away with it.

Jesus tells them not to stop anyone who is using his name to accomplish constructive things, whether a disciple or not. For anyone who finds the power of Jesus' name will not speak ill about him. Then Jesus goes on to say about putting a stumbling block in front of new believers or potential converts. His teaching about dismembering yourself then becomes about cutting away all of your personal practices that might hinder faith in someone else. A literal translation of the Greek text here is,

"If your hand causes you to become a scandal, cut it off... If your foot causes you to become a scandal, cut it off... If your eye causes you to become a scandal, tear it out..."

In other words, if your personal practices or lifestyle are causing problems of faith in others, if you are a scandal to their faith, then you need to get rid of it. It is better to give up offensive practices than to keep them and be liable for the failure of others' faith.

This is something that is to be aimed at individuals or communities of faith. Churches often have practices or teachings that offend others. Two weeks ago a new Lutheran church was founded in Rochester - It's called the South Wedge Mission. The Rev. Matthew Nickoloff, who grew up on Gillis Road here in Victor is its mission developer. It is based on reaching the many people in the South Wedge who have been turned off or offended by the practices of the church. You may also know that Peace Lutheran Church exists in the South Wedge. It recently voted to close - in large part because it recognized that it was a stumbling block, a scandal, to expressing Christian faith to people in its area.

I don't know what the future will bring for the South Wedge Mission. But I do appreciate Peace Lutheran Church's members recognizing that they aren't in service to the gospel to the people around them. It is better to close - to be cut off - than to continue to exist and be a problem.

We represent God's kingdom with our every word and our every action and our every choice. Keep your faith at the core of your being, cut away all that hinders God's work in you, and rejoice in life lived in God's good favor. Amen