

Our gospel reading for today always makes me go, "ouch!" Cutting off limbs and plucking out eyes is just too vivid to leave unfelt. Of course Jesus doesn't mean it literally. He often speaks using parables and exaggerations, but some have taken these words literally. Perhaps the most famous is Origen Adamantius, the second century Christian who infamously castrated himself so that certain body parts wouldn't cause him to sin. Artists always struggle to know exactly how to depict him.

However, I think this does all point to a four letter word that most of us use sloppily. That four letter word is "nice". You may remember me saying this before, but "nice" originally was an insult. If you look at its Latin and Middle English roots you realize it means ignorant, foolish, stupid and incapable. Was Jesus a "nice" guy? Nope. Jesus spoke the truth, even when it hurt.

There is deep truth to what Jesus taught that day. We may like to think of faith and relationship with Christ as being a warm and fuzzy experience. We think of Jesus as kind and sweet, a friendly shoulder to hug. There are hymns like, *What a Friend*

*We Have in Jesus* and *Jesus Loves Me*. We start to think that if it has to do with faith and it feels good, then it must be good. And if it has to do with faith and it feels bad then it must be bad. But sometimes what you need for true health hurts.

An alcohol addict can only expect to get to a life of health if he/she is willing to amputate the family/friends/community that enables the addiction.

A person caught in a destructive co-dependent relationship will only get out of it when that person is willing to amputate the relationship that feels so necessary for survival.

In a similar vein, (we talked about this last week) isn't our American quest for success nothing more than an exhausting race to nowhere? That's no way to fullness of life or being an effective disciple of Jesus. Pushing against the social models of success will hurt and hurt badly.

In the midst of thinking about personally cutting out things that make our faith stumble let's not lose sight of the other half of this passage - when things you do cause other people to stumble. Jesus was speaking of new and potential followers when he said, "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." Once again, not a nice image. And also once again, a very challenging one - particularly these days.

You've heard me say before the world has changed dramatically in the last few decades. The whole way people think and make decisions has changed. Up to the 1960's people generally trusted institutions and the government. Things were seen as right or wrong; good or bad. Truth was absolute. If you wanted to know something you consulted a book or an expert, and you generally believed that book or expert.

Today that trust is gone. Things seem grey. Truth isn't absolute but relative. And if you want to know something there is the internet. There is also a host of points of view.

People who grew up prior to the 60's walk into a church and see the pastor and immediately give that person's words and interpretation authority, simply because of the role as pastor. People born in the 1990's or later walk into a church and see the pastor and if that pastor wants to have any authority he or she has to earn it by proving that what is said is applicable and relevant.

I could go on and on. I don't say any of this to have us mourn the changes. I say it because it is a statement of reality. Our culture has changed deeply and dramatically in a very short time. In general the church has not. Why are most churches declining in our nation? There are numerous reasons. One of them is because churches are inadvertently putting stumbling blocks in the way of new believers. Their worship, operating structure, and attitudes just simply turn people away.

I don't think I'll ever be thankful enough for our congregation's decision to use moveable seating in our sanctuary and keeping everything moveable. It's more than just about the physical ability to rearrange the room. It's about the mindset that goes along with the flexibility.

You'll remember that we rearranged the seating in here for the summer and experimented with different things. Many people liked it. No one really complained, but some people rightfully pointed out some logistical problems. The thing is, you couldn't dream of pulling a stunt like that in most places. The sanctuary's arrangement is such a deeply and emotionally held thing that change is impossible. And that impossibility of change is a stumbling block.

If you were here in the summer you'll know that putting the seats in a U shape around the baptismal font, pulpit and altar created a whole different feel to worship, even though the service itself didn't change. It was a far more relational experience. It felt like more of a community gathering than a stage production.

In a culture where relationships and community matter you can bet that seating arrangement will return, and quite likely become basically permanent. We are to be praised for being so accepting, but it also comes with a sense of loss. To change means that an old and meaningful way has ended. I believe we all have more changes ahead of us than we have behind us.

Last week Elizabeth Eaton, the Presiding Bishop of the ELCA, met with Lutheran pastors from across upstate New York. She had a very important reminder that many of us so easily forget. She got at it this way. She asked, "Why do we want people in church?" And then she gave several wrong answers.

-We do not want people in church to grow the church.

-We do not want people in church to fix the world.

-We do not want people in church so they can be better people.

All of these reasons for having people in the church are wrong. And if we use them as motivations we are creating stumbling blocks for new believers.

Why do we want people in church? The right answer: So they can get to know Jesus. It's that simple. The church is about community - it is the community of people in relationship with each other and in relationship with Jesus. The church should be about the task of strengthening your relationship with Jesus. We don't have membership cards. But if we did I guarantee that at the pearly gates showing that you are a card carrying member of St. John's Lutheran Church of Victor New York would get you nowhere. The love that your Lord and savior, Jesus the Christ, has for you will get you everywhere. Our task as a community of faith is to deepen and expand the opportunities for connecting with the love of Christ as much as possible.

If in any way a church hinders people from getting to know Jesus then it is creating a stumbling block. I'll boldly state that I find most churches are more interested in servicing their buildings and institutions than actually helping people get to know Jesus. May that not be us. And may we find that together we are deepened in our relationship with Christ. And may that deepening also be an opening to bringing others to know the love Christ has for them as well. Amen