

**Formed by Jesus: Radical Surgery**  
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church  
February 4, 2024 AM Sermon  
Reverend Peter Jonker  
Mark 9:42-50

Every week we send out notices of our church services online. We send out an email, we put them on Instagram, we put ads on social media. These ads have an accompanying graphic that we use for the whole sermon series; an image that captures the series' theme. This series is called Formed by Jesus, and so our image for the series is a pair of hands shaping clay on a potter's wheel. It's an image of formation.

I wonder, though, if an artist's hand gently shaping a lump of clay is the right image for this week's text. After reading this text it feels like the image should be a surgeon holding a sharp scalpel. Because the kind of formation Jesus describes here is not a gentle molding of your soul; it's radical surgery. If your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off too!

What do we do with these hard words? Have we done anything with these hard words? Have we taken them to heart? Let's do a quiz. (Work with me here. This is a formation exercise.) Raise your hand if your eye, or your foot or your hand has ever caused you to sin. Thank you for your honesty. I can't help noticing that those of you who raised your hands still have your hands attached to your body. Also: I see very few gouged out eyes in the room. Are we disobeying Jesus? Are we going against the Bible? Should there be more cutting off of body parts in the modern church?

No. I'm glad there has been no gouging out of eyes and no cutting off of hands. Somehow when you read these words, you sense that we are not supposed to take Jesus literally, and in so doing you stand with every reputable commentator in Christian history. I think we all understand that Jesus is engaging in hyperbole here. Hyperbole is an exaggerated way of speaking meant to get the listener's attention. You don't take hyperbole literally. When your 6-year-old son says, 'Mom if I have to eat this pea soup I'll die,' that's hyperbole. You don't call 911. You understand that this is not literal.

So when we interpret this passage we can say, "We don't need to cut off our hands! Jesus doesn't mean this literally! It's hyperbole." And we can breathe a sigh of relief. But is that all there is to say? Do we just say: "O good! It's hyperbole!" and move on to one of those nice passages where Jesus says comforting and encouraging things? I don't think so. That would be a mistake. Jesus is using hyperbole for a reason. He may not want us to take him literally, but he wants us to take him seriously. There's a reason he uses shocking imagery: he wants to get our attention. He wants us to see that this is really important.

What specifically is so important? Jesus doesn't want our behavior to cause people to stumble, and there are two groups of potential stumblers who Jesus is worried about.

First, Jesus is worried that we will cause others to stumble. Verse 42: "If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, it would be better if they were drowned." Who are these little ones, and what might we do that would cause them to stumble? Jesus says 'these' little ones; what's the referent of the word 'these'? It has to be the characters from the two previous stories. In one of those stories Jesus takes a child and lifts him up and holds him in his arms; a beautiful image. And Jesus says, "if you welcome one of these children, you welcome me." They've been fighting among themselves, arguing about who was the greatest, so by picking up the young child, Jesus is saying, "I don't care about your greatest fights; I care about you welcoming the weak and the marginal, people like this little one!"

In the story right before ours, the disciples run into another marginal person. They find a man they've never seen before, someone new to the faith, someone on the margins of the faith who is nevertheless casting out demons in Jesus' name. The disciples do not welcome him. They get proprietary. "Excuse me sir, but do you have a license to throw out those demons. You do know that we are Jesus' official representatives and we're not sure you have the proper authorization." Jesus says, "No! welcome him. He's on our team." In both stories, "these little ones" are people who are young in faith or weak in faith, and Jesus doesn't want our behavior to be an obstacle to them; he wants us to welcome them.

I read a story this week about an example of this behavior from church History. In the year 1265, Marco Polo had completed his journeys east and had earned the trust of the great Mongolian emperor Kublai Khan. Kublai Khan's empire was huge. Millions of people lived within its borders; it spread from the Pacific Ocean to the Black Sea. In his conversations with Marco Polo, the emperor had become interested in the Christian faith - so much so that he asked Marco Polo to go back and bring 100 missionaries back with him so that the emperor's court could learn Christianity. This was an amazing opportunity! If Kublai Khan embraced Christ, his whole empire might follow, the whole east! So Marco Polo went home and made the request. But the church was in such disarray, fighting among themselves that it was nearly 30 years before anything happened, and it was only one missionary who came, not 100. By then, the Khan said, "It is too late! I have grown old in my idolatry." The church could have welcomed; instead it was a stumbling block.

So, does our fighting (about who is the greatest or whatever else) still become a stumbling block for the world around us. Is the behavior of the church still something that causes people who have curiosity about faith to turn away? Yes. Last Sunday night we heard that according to Gallup trust of clergy has gone from 67% of people saying we were trustworthy in 1985 to just 33% in 2020. That's stumbling block territory. I'm glad Jesus' words are hyperbole here so I don't have to do something drastic, but I certainly hear Jesus saying I have to do better. We have to do better.

The second group of people Jesus is worried about causing to stumble is ourselves. We can become a stumbling block to ourselves. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. If your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out. How do we do that? How do we become a stumbling block for ourselves? How do we trip ourselves up? So many ways. Your pride, your vanity, your anger, your envy, your lust, your greed, your impatience, your spitefulness, your laziness, your fear, your insecurity, any one of these sins or any combination of these sins can cause us to stumble. When it comes to messing us up, sin is endlessly creative.

That's why Jesus calls us to be fierce with our sin. This is where all the language of radical surgery comes in. "You've got to cut this stuff out of your life!" Jesus' imagery is violent, but it fits the imagery of other passages that warn us about our sin. Romans 8:13: "If you live according to the flesh you will surely die, but if, by the Spirit, you put to death the misdeeds of the body you will live." Let the Spirit help you to put your sin to death. Cut it out. Kill it. Colossians 3:5: "Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature." Schedule your sin for execution.

We know these passages, right? I'm not telling you anything you don't know. You know what they're telling you to do. You know they're calling you to cut that sin out of your life. But here's my question. How's that going? Are you cutting off those sins in big bunches? Are you watching sin fall from your life in big clumps never to be seen again??

Let me ask it this way: If you and I sat down and I looked you in the eye and said, "Name one time in your life where you did radical surgery, where you had a sin in your life and you just cut it off and left it behind," how long would it take you to come up with an answer? I think some of you could do it, but I suspect many of us would have a hard time coming up with something. I would. You would say, "Well, it hasn't been that way for me; I'm just trying to chip away at the mountain of sin with the teaspoon of my will and it's slow going." That's right, isn't it. That's honest.

Here's the truth: You already know your sins; you know what's broken. You know what needs to be cut away, you've known for a long time, so why can't you do it? Why can't you do the radical surgery? When it comes down to it, we're all addicts in our own way and we're not good at kicking the habit. To me this is the hardest part of Jesus' words here: how their pointed truth runs up against the reality of my own weakness, and yours.

You know who we're like, we are all like the rich young man whom Jesus encounters in the very next chapter of Mark. In that story it's like the words of this teaching get applied in a real life situation. A man comes up to Jesus and says, "What must I do to be saved?" Jesus says, "Keep the commandments." The man says, "I've done that." Then Jesus looks into his heart, sees his personal addictions, and Jesus says, "One thing you lack. Sell all your possessions and give to the poor." Radical surgery, right? Cut away all your possessions. That's like cutting off an arm or gouging out an eye, right? Can he do it? No. He walks away. Jesus hands him the scalpel and he can't bring himself to start cutting.

Which is why, in real life, often the only way our sin gets cut away is when God takes the scalpel to us. We have a hard time cutting away our cherished addictions, but sometimes God allows things to come into our life that perform this radical surgery.

John Donne was a great English poet of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. In his youth Donne was a womanizer who liked the good times. He wrote erotic poetry and lived a wild life. He had money, good looks and a gift with words and he used them all to his advantage. But life took a hard turn for him. He became poor, and eventually, he became quite sick. At one point in his life, during an outbreak of the plague in London, he got so sick, everyone, himself included, assumed that he would die. He didn't, but that experience changed him. He was a much weaker man after the illness and at the end of his life. But he was also stronger. His poetry turned more intently towards his Christian faith. At the end of his life he wrote the Holy Sonnets which are still read in English classes today. He also became a great preacher.

John Donne died in his late 50's. He was bed-ridden in his final weeks, but as death came closer, Donne wanted to get up and preach one last sermon before he died, and so for the first Sunday in Lent in 1632, he rose from his bed and preached a famous sermon called Death's Duel. It was like he preached his own funeral sermon, a dying man proclaiming resurrection hope. Isaak Walton, his biographer was there watching the sermon. Walton talked about how Donne was so frail and thin that they wondered if he would be able to make it through. But as he preached he got stronger and stronger and the words filled the room with conviction and hope.

After watching him preach, Walton contrasted the picture of frail John Donne preaching that sermon with a painting he'd seen of Donne when he was 18. He was strong, good looking, well-dressed, with a sword at his side. This was the Donne of the erotic poems and the parties. At the bottom of the painting were these words: "How much shall I be changed before I am changed? Here's a spiritual exercise. Find a picture of your 18-year-old self and write those words under it: "How much shall I be changed before I am changed?" The John Donne who stood in the pulpit and preached that sermon was a man upon whom God had performed radical surgery. And though the man who preached that sermon was battered, and weak, there was something in him that lit up the room and still brings light to people today.

I have a poem by John Donne pinned to bulletin board above my desk. It's a poem written at the end of his life, a poem that wasn't published until after he died. It's called, Batter My Heart, Three-Person'd God. The poem is a prayer for God to perform the radical surgery on him, the surgery that he can't do himself. Here are the first four lines:

Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine and seek to mend;  
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend  
Your force to break, blow, burn and make me new.

He's praying for God to batter him. He's praying for God to do radical surgery so that he can rise and be whole. Can you pray this prayer? Can I? Most days I pray for peace, for safety. I pray to be spared from trouble. I do not pray for my heart to be battered and yet, God knows my heart needs it, and so does yours.

And so some days Christ holds us tenderly, and other days he performs his radical surgery and lets our hearts be battered. But we can be sure that on all of these days and in all of these things he is working for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purposes. Because the one who calls us to cut the sin out of our life is the one who let his own body be cut and pierced and battered so that we could be saved. The Lord who spoke these hard words is also the Lord who hung on the cross, so that our small lives could finally take that holy shape which he has in store for all his children.

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