

James 5: 13-20
Mark 9: 38-50
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
September 30, 2012

When I was around ten years old, there was a movie at the local theater that my dad thought would be a great family film. It was called “The Man with the X-Ray Eyes”. So we walked down to the theater. I was excited for we never went to the movies. The film told the story of a chemist who discovered a formula which allowed him to see through things. As the story developed the man became more and more daring. And at the point when he began to look through women’s clothes my mother hoisted me out of my seat and home we went.

The next morning I asked how the movie ended. My dad looked sheepish; but my sister who was thirteen or fourteen at the time filled me in on what I missed with great gusto. It turns out that with this great ability, the chemist went slowly insane. At the end of the movie he ends up at a small Pentecostal church where the scripture of the day is from today’s reading from Mark. Of course, the translation came from the King James Version: “If thine eye deceives thee, pluck it out.” The verse became a dull and hypnotic chant which my sister rendered with great drama. “Pluck it out. Pluck it out. Pluck it out.”

The movie ends with the man reaching for his eyes.

So much for nice family movies.

I tell this story not just because it is one of my favorite tales of my childhood; but to illustrate the dangers of taking the teachings of Jesus too much at face value. Clearly the movie intends us to understand the man’s literal response to the scripture to be the outcome

of madness. His “gift” at first is exciting and gives him a feeling of power. Gradually he is seduced by the feeling of power and it becomes the driving force of his life. In the end, like the addict who realizes his or her addiction is ruining his or her life but who is powerless to stop, the man is driven to despair.

I propose to you this morning that whatever the teachings of scripture in general and those of Jesus in particular may be, we may evaluate their true intention by this simple test: Do they encourage a sense of hope or do they lead us to despair? Does the teaching of Jesus spark a desire to grow in faith? Or does it plant the thought of doing something self destructive? Does Jesus want me to cut off offending parts of my body? Does he really think these acts will save my soul? More to the point is the sinful desire which causes me to use my hand, foot and eye in unhealthy ways going to go away if the offending body part is removed? I don't think so.

I operate that scripture in general and the teachings of Jesus in particular always aim us toward hope. The reason the Bible is the word *of God* is that every word is intended to awaken us to the true life of the living and loving Creator. All scripture intends to awaken us to, as Paul writes to Timothy, “the life *that really is life.*”

Now having said this, in the spirit of full disclosure, I must say that one of the ways scripture, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, does this is tough love. In order to waken us to life, we must come to recognize that there are ways we live that can never open us to the true life and peace God wants us to have. We have deeply ingrained behavior patterns which may comfort us in the short term but which will not ever give us calm of heart and mind. So, painfully, scripture confronts us with the futility of those behaviors.

Am I trying to please God by being a good boy? Am I trying to find peace by working hard to make everybody around me happy? Is peace for me the avoidance of conflict? Do I think that if I lose myself in work I will someday have all that I want? Will a drink solve my problems? My guess is that for most of us the answer to these questions is “no.” And yet, while we know this intellectually, how many of us find ourselves persisting in the very behaviors which we know won’t get us where we want to go?

I am not a fire and brimstone preacher; but I will say this: At its best, this form of preaching aims at awakening the soul to the futility of all of our behavior patterns which can never bring us peace with God. Though their words sound harsh and judgmental, they intend to awaken us to the hopelessness of our worldly efforts to find peace and security through seeking to gratify our desires. But the ultimate aim of this preaching is further to awaken us to hope. *There is a better way!* As Jesus said to the rich young man who wanted to inherit eternal life, “Sell all you have and then *come, follow me!*” There is a better way! *I am the way! I am the truth! I am the life!*

Any interpretation of scripture that awakens us to the futility of our lives and rubs our noses in what miserable sinners we are with out urging us to new life is simple abusive. It simply reinforces our sense of powerlessness. It is the genuine offer of hope that transforms a message of from mere condemnation to a means powerful transformation.

When I was in treatment for alcoholism the counselor asked or group, “Why are you in treatment?” With one voice we replied, “Because we can’t stop drinking.” “NO!” said the counselor, “You are in treatment because *you can!*” As one who for decades had believed he could not live without alcohol this was not just good news, it was amazing news! And this

morning I can stand here before you and say that this is the true message of scripture and of the good news of Jesus Christ in particular.

Maybe this morning you may answer the question, “Why are you here?” with the reply, “Because I cannot find peace and joy in my life. I cannot find God.” I am here to say, “NO! You are here because you can find God; you can find peace; you can find meaning and purpose in your life!” This is God’s deepest desire for his children. He sent Jesus into the world to show us the way to peace. This peace is salvation. It is available to you if you deeply want it and are willing to do whatever it takes to find it.

This brings me back to this grisly text from Mark. When we are confronted with the choice of persisting in behaviors which we know don’t work and admitting we need help our brain often will immediately tell us, “Oh, it’s really not that bad. Your life isn’t really unmanageable. Work harder, retirement isn’t that far away, our problems aren’t as bad as other people’s. I am not willing to cut off my hand or foot or tear out my eyes to find God!

But friends that is not the message. The message is simply to trust that this is a quality of *this* life that God wants you to have beginning *now*. Look to the life! Cultivate and nourish the idea that this life is not beyond you! It is something God created you to experience. He has sent Jesus into the world to make this life possible!

Friends, if you feel a stirring of hope please speak to me. Let’s start a journey of hope together. Better yet let us journey as a people who believe we can! Amen.