

Sermon, 1 October 2006—Proper 21
“Hearing God’s Call—on Stewardship”

Numbers 11:4-29; Psalm 19; James 4:7—5:6; Mark 9:38-48

As we enter together the next several months—a time of stewardship drives, of sesquicentennial celebrations, of new ministry—we will all be engaged in the work of discernment; that is, we will try together to help each other hear God’s call to us, individually and corporately, at Saint John’s in Saint Cloud. Today’s lessons give us rather harrowing depictions of what happens to us when we begin to get somewhat hard of hearing, even when we begin to block the ability to hear in ourselves and in others. These lessons are so sharp, that we must, before we talk about the role of hearing, come to terms with their warnings about taking and giving offense.

Jesus’ statements are shocking: the punishment for giving offense is death by drowning; the punishment for taking offense is mutilation. Of course, scholars say, Jesus was not laying down a juridical code; of course, scholars say, Semitic people exaggerate using the most vivid terms for emphasis and attention. But even allowing that, the warnings are alarming and uncomfortably violent. We understand, I believe, that we ought not to give offense. Christians have a much harder time realizing they ought not to take offense either: volunteering to be outraged and insulted and hurt by the other members of the church is all too frequently the congregational activity that recruits the greatest number of participants. So that is where we will spend our time this morning, because that is our soul’s greatest risk, not hurting others, but perceiving others as those that hurt.

I think our horror at Jesus’ ruthless and violent sayings is a testimony to the significance of our physicality, our embodied nature. Even if we allegorize these stern injunctions, attempting to make them more palatable

and tolerable, simple snapshots of a stance, these brutal recommendations are painful to hear because our bodies are so precious and vital to us. Such turning on oneself in self-hatred we recognize as pathological. We know that this urge to cut off our connection with creation and to pluck out our source of appreciation and understanding is so counter to our healthy functioning that going to those extremes would only be necessary when something much more precious than physical wholeness is at stake. Under any other circumstances, it is self-destructive, perhaps even self-loathing, and that means it is never far from the demonic. So this carnal meaning of self-mutilation cannot be intended, because it would be a repudiation and a ravaging of what God has made; and morally it would be an insistence that we know better than God how we ought to be constituted—always a risky approach.

Part of the alarm of these injunctions, it seems to me, is that the organs Jesus draws our attention to are interconnected and cooperative. They are the bodily members that are essential for our successful navigation of the world: the eye guides the hand, the hand confirms the eye, and our feet move us towards what we glimpse and want to handle—or away from danger. These three—hand, foot, and eye—link us with reality. When they become unreliable—no, when they lead us into danger, when they become stumbling blocks—we must consider removing our dependence on them: we must cut them off. It is not, please note, that our eye distracts us or that our hand interrupts us or that our foot strays, but that they become seedbeds of sin. When our reliance on them, when our daily exercise of their functions, constantly give rise to fear and greed and rage, then something is wrong. If I cannot look at you without envy, if I cannot touch you without lust, if I

cannot move through a crowd without offense and resentment and anger, then something is wrong with the way I look and touch and move.

And here we open up the point of these hard sayings of Jesus, because all three of these bodily organs are also symbols of relationship. They are, at their best, what enable us to relate constructively to others and to the world around us: appreciative vision, compassionate action. They link us with each other. They enable the ministry of reconciliation to go on: seeing what needs to be done, going there, and reaching out our hands towards our fellow creatures to ease and strengthen them. If these become stumbling blocks—if what ought to interweave community hinders community, if what ought to bring joy and hope and nourishment festers and poisons and frets—then, pluck them out and cut them off. If your way of seeing and your way of acting brings you grief and fear and anger, then stop seeing and acting that way! Simple, but not easy; urgent, but not quick.

Now, we also must see that the response to taking offense, to causing ourselves to stumble, is an act of self-discernment and of self-restraint, of self-correction and of self-discipline. We are to limit and correct and pull in ourselves, not others, when our means of relating to them become stumbling blocks for us. My resentment about another person is my problem, not theirs, and the solution must lie with me, not with them. My fear of a colleague, my envy of a companion, are my problem, not theirs, and I must learn to deal with my fears and envies by tempering myself, not by attacking them. My itchy grasping clutching fingers clutter and cramp my life; I am the one suffering from the narrowness and sourness and tightness. I may be unpleasant to those who are in my way, but they come and go, while my bitter retelling of the story of my deprivation gnaws at the bars of the cage of my life day and night without rest—and that is what must change.

However, even as I say this, you and I both recognize these comments as a kind of Stoic common sense: why torment yourself? Get over it. The stories in Scripture, though, recognize that the most sinister and deadly poison of all is not found in these familiar kinds of malevolence and ignorance, but is harvested and distilled in the lush fields of righteousness. The most destructive envy is our envy over God's bounty offered to others; the most poisonous resentment is our anger over God's blessing of others.

The two stories we are given today recount occasions when both Moses and Jesus warn us about taking offense. We prefer to think of sin as active: the doing of bad things. But in these stories, the warning is given to those whose sin is passive: the resenting and envying of good things. The occasion of those stories is the glory of God overflowing its expected banks: the Nile at full flood fertilizing the valley of Egypt. Here we see the extravagant bounty of God's grace: manna falls daily, a liberated people walk away from Egypt, God's Spirit falls on Eldad and Medad, stranded in the camp, and they begin to prophesy, and in Jesus' day, strangers take to invoking his name to perform miracles of healing. God's grace and goodness and power cannot be stopped but stretch beyond the plausible and the anticipated to feed and to free and to heal. In the presence of all this, the people say they are tired of looking at the manna; Moses says he is tired of putting up with these former slaves; Joshua tells Moses to silence Eldad and Medad; and the disciples are resentful and jealous of the miracles of healing taking place at another's hands. But manna is about God's ongoing provision, the chosen people are about God's liberating intervention, the prophesying and the healings are about God's intentional restoration of humanity by means of humanity. These ARE the miracles. To say we are tired of them, resent them, wish to control and alter and dampen them, is to

resist God's saving activity. To say we wish to issue them only in approved limited editions, signed by the author, and held as our monopoly, is to resent God's tireless love of all that God has made.

So Moses says, "No, I wish all God's people were prophets!" And Jesus says, "No, do not stop them, because no one doing a deed of power in my name will be able to speak evil of us." The problem isn't fixed, the ministers are multiplied. There will be more miracles in more places, not less—and they will happen without our consent. Both Moses and Jesus both say: let there be more, not less! Preaching in the kitchen! Healing in the parking lot! Compassion in the office! Reconciliation in the supermarket! New life in the home!

So when our seeing becomes faulty and our handling unreliable and when, for the good of our soul, we are able not to trust our seeing and handling, but to suspect them and to quarantine them, at that point hearing God's call becomes the essential way to correct our progress and to stay on track. This is when we come to understand the value of community. A deep listening is necessary, a deep openness, a deep tolerance of where God might be active, in the world, in the community, in that other person. Our task is the self-restraint and the self-questioning (learning to listen, learning to discern), that enable us to hear God's Story in Scripture first, so that we can recognize it when we hear it in the witness and hope and gratitude of those around us. Before we judge what we see, before we reach out to act, we must learn to hear what God is already doing and calling us to participate in, and then to direct our steps towards that. God's call to us—calling us towards the way out of the darkness we are in—is heard in our calls to each other, encouraging, going ahead, interpreting for each other, discerning together what the way forward is, keeping each other from stumbling. Then,

of course, we understand why Jesus says “Woe to the one who causes others to stumble!” Woe to the one whose actions cause others to remain in frustration and alienation and despair, without finding the way forward.

These doubts about our self, these exercises in self-restraint, cannot, in the mercy and grace of God, overcome the good will with which God draws all things to their fulfillment. Even when, for the sake of our soul’s health, we have cut off one of our angry hands or plucked out one of our envious eyes, we can still hear the voices of our companions, the great cloud of witnesses here in this congregation and in the choirs of heaven, guiding us and becoming for us God’s call to us to join in the praise of the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit, One God, now and forever.