

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on September 26, 2021 (Proper 21, Year B)

I'm always amazed at the variety of lawn ornaments I see around town. I'm not talking garden gnomes or statues of St. Francis or, this time of year, pumpkins. I mean the big stuff. Like anchors or row boats sticking halfway out of the ground. In the winter, and I swear I'd never seen anything like this until I moved to Hingham, people put literal sleighs in their yards. As if Santa was coming through, got discouraged at the sheer volume of houses, and just abandoned ship.

But the thing that amazes me the most are the millstones. You know, those large circular stones that were once used to grind grains but for some reason ended up as lawn decorations. Every time I see one, all I can think about is this reading from Mark's gospel: "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." In related news, I'm not much fun to drive around town with.

There is some tough language in this passage. These words of Jesus are hard to hear and, if I'm honest, hard to preach on. But every three years when this particular reading comes up, I think to myself, I can't just leave it hanging out there without saying *something*. And the millstone isn't even the half of it. "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off... If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off... If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out.... For it is better to enter life lame than to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire."

You can't listen to that and then just nonchalantly go to coffee hour. Or head to the Fruit Center to buy half a pound of thinly sliced ham. Because, not only is there the possibility of amputation for sinful acts, the alternative is to be tossed into a pit of fire. Taken literally, if you sin, and we all do, you have a choice: gouge out one of your eyeballs or endure the fiery furnace. Which sounds an awful lot like good, old-fashioned fire and brimstone. And we don't get much of that around here; not from this pulpit. Over the years, you may have noticed that we tend to preach more love than damnation.

So, if judgment and damnation are what you're looking for, a) you may want to do some church shopping, and b) I hate to burst your hell-fire bubble but Jesus isn't actually trying to frighten the disciples into faith. Which isn't something that ever really works anyway. Jesus is intentionally using provocative language to get our attention, to grab us by the lapels, to shake us out of our complacency so that we won't just *hear* his words but *listen* to them. And I'd say it's pretty effective. Hearing the Prince of Peace talking about millstones and cutting off feet and the flames of hell certainly makes you sit up and take notice.

You should know that the phrases themselves – the whole rhythm of "If your (fill-in-the-blank body part) causes you to stumble, cut it off" – were familiar proverbs in Jesus' day. His hearers knew they weren't to be taken literally. Which is why the early disciples weren't a bunch of blind amputees. Jesus, as you may know, was a master of hyperbole. He uses it to amuse and inspire and challenge. Not to scare and terrify and threaten. As when he says, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." Or, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." "If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off," is hyperbole. Deftly used to make a larger point.

There's an old story about a well-known preacher who once said in a sermon, "First, while you were sleeping last night, 30,000 kids died of starvation or diseases related to malnutrition. Second, most of you don't give a [he used a word that rhymes with 'ship']. What's worse, is that you're more upset with the fact that I said [the word that rhymes with ship] than the fact that 30,000 kids died last night."

This is not a rhetorical technique you could use every Sunday. And Jesus didn't talk about lopping off limbs very often. But when he does, you take notice. In the first case, you may remember and reflect upon those 30,000 children dying. In the second, you may remember to ask yourself what you would be willing to sacrifice for your faith.

Because when we get past the shock value of the language, we see that Jesus' larger point is all about discipleship. Jesus is really asking about the lengths we would go to follow him. Jesus is challenging the disciples to think about the commitment of their faith. Asking them, in effect, 'Just how strong is your faith? What would you sacrifice in order to keep it? A hand? A foot? An eye?' He's not asking us to sacrifice a body part, but he *is* asking us to sacrifice *something*.

And so the question to us is, what are you willing to sacrifice for your faith? What are you willing to give up in order to live faithfully? This question reverberates in ways great and small. Are you willing to give up 20 minutes of Netflix to read Scripture before bed? Are you willing to give up golf on a beautiful Sunday morning in order to come to church? Are you willing to say "no" to youth sports that take place at 10 am on Sunday mornings? (If not, you can always come to the 5 o'clock service). Are you willing to cut your vacation a day short and give those savings to assist people in need? Are you willing to forsake the use of plastics in order to help the environment?

I'm sure you could come up with all sorts of other ways to sacrifice for your faith. And even if the answer to such questions is 'no' or 'not entirely,' at least you're engaging with the issue of how your faith fits with the priorities of your life. And that's what Jesus seeks; that's what Jesus desires; that's what Jesus invites us to consider. It's not about sacrificing limbs or hanging millstones around our necks, it's about sacrificing the things in our lives that draw us *away* from God's love, while focusing on the things that draw us *to* God's love.

So the next time you see one of those millstones in a front yard, think about your faith. Think about what you might sacrifice in order to magnify your relationship with our Lord. And be thankful for those times when Jesus' words yank us out of our complacency, and force us to focus on that which really matters in this life.