

SPIRITUAL AMPUTATION

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Text: Mark 9:38-50

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

"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. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

"For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

So last week I was telling you how nobody really loves these verses about cutting off hands and feet and plucking out eyeballs, but thanks to my dog, Henry, I've been giving them a second look. As I mentioned, Henry has had some health issues recently. He came back from the kennel this summer with a cut on his tail from wagging it against the fence between the runs. So we wrapped it up, but he kept tearing the bandage off and re-opening the wound and bleeding all over the place.

So then I tried one of those cones, but he kept getting around it. So then I tried duct taping two cones together, which did the trick, it kept him from bothering his tail, but the problem was he couldn't reach his water bowl. So finally I got so frustrated I went to the hardware store and got some PVC pipe and put it over his tail and attached it with duct tape and weed whacker line. That did the trick, also, but every time he wagged his tail, the whole contraption would fly off and sail across the room and break something.

That was one of Henry's issues. His other issue was his eye. Back in July, I noticed his right eye was a little bigger than the left, and within a day or two it was bulging out of the socket. So we took him to our vet, and she referred him to a specialist, and it turned out he had a tumor. It was benign, but it was getting bigger and bigger and causing a lot of damage. So last month, we had his eye removed. And while we were at it, we went ahead and had his tail removed because by that point it was completely infected.

I took him to an animal hospital in Rhode Island, and what I remember about that morning is how guilty I felt. I took his picture out on the driveway before we got in the car because—I don't know—I think I was afraid. I was afraid of how he'd look afterwards. I was afraid he'd be in a lot of pain. And I was afraid he'd think I had done this to him.

As it turned out, though, the surgery was a much bigger deal for me than it was for Henry. He was a little groggy when I first brought him home, but that was about it. I don't think he even noticed he had parts missing. There was no emotional trauma. He didn't need any grief counseling. He just went right back to sleeping all day and freaking out every time the Fedex guy shows up. And that's what made me re-think these verses.

I thought this surgery was a bad thing that was happening to Henry. I thought it was the end of the world. But it was actually a good thing. It got rid of the disease that was making him sick, and it spared him a lot of pain, and it saved his life. Without it, the tumor in his eye would've kept growing, the infection in his tail would've kept spreading, and eventually he would've died. And seeing what a good thing it was, I wondered if maybe what Jesus is telling us to do is somehow also not a bad thing, but a good thing. I know it doesn't seem like it. I know it seems like a horrible thing—cutting off our own appendages. But you have to think of it as spiritual amputation, not physical amputation.

That's what Jesus is really talking about here. He's not talking about cutting off flesh and bone. He's talking about cutting off baggage—whatever it is that's weighing us down; whatever it is that's holding us back. Holding us back from living the kind of life God wants us to live. A life of joy. A life of fulfillment. A life of connection.

Spiritual baggage comes in many shapes and sizes, but I think the most common form is resentment—when we can't let go of old slights and injuries; when we nurse grudges; when we keep old animosities alive and refuse to move forward. I think that's the spiritual disease that most often afflicts us.

So what I want you to do is take a moment right now, and search around in the storerooms of your mind, and see if you can locate a resentment—some old wound that never healed. Something that was said, or maybe left un-said. Something that was

done, or maybe left un-done. Picture the person, whoever it was. Remember the moment, whether it was a year ago or fifty years ago. And then notice how you're feeling now. What's happening with your body as those old emotions well up? Are you hunching your shoulders? Are you clenching your fists? Is your chest getting tight?

Take a deep breath in, hold it for a second, and let it out.

This is what resentment does. It's like a tumor, putting pressure on the healthy tissue around it. It takes up all the space in our minds and squeezes out every other thought. It's like an infection, weakening the whole body. It drains our energy and saps our strength. But letting go of our resentments is not an easy thing to do. And I think that's why Jesus talks about it the way he does—as an amputation. He knows we can't just snap our fingers and be rid of these feelings. After carrying them around inside us for so long, they become part of who we are. They become part of our identity.

So the idea of removing them from our lives can be as unthinkable as the idea of maiming our own bodies. And yet this maiming is necessary, Jesus says, if we are to enter life fully. We can't bring our baggage with us into God's presence. God's kingdom consists entirely of amputees whose resentments have all been cut off and discarded. And the way we do that is by forgiving. That's really what we're talking about here—forgiving whoever it was we pictured when we thought of an old resentment; forgiving whoever it was who hurt or offended or betrayed us. And that's not easy for anyone.

The other week I went to an overnight retreat the Presbytery held for clergy, and I met this one person whose whole ministry is about forgiveness. She leads workshops and does consulting, and she told me the biggest reason why people can't forgive is because they think it means what happened to them doesn't matter, and they think it means whoever did it is off the hook.

But that's not what forgiveness is about. Forgiveness is not about forgetting the past; it's about living in the present. It's about not letting what happened to us then continue to have power over us now. And it's not about the other person; it's about us. It's about not letting the other person continue to take up room in our minds.

So maybe you've been in a medical office or a hospital room where there was a special container labeled "biohazard." That's where we put things that pose a risk to our physical health—things that are contaminated, things that are poisonous, things that could make us sick.

Now imagine a biohazard container of a different sort. This is where we put things that pose a risk to our spiritual health—things that could harden our hearts, things that could make us bitter, things that could isolate us within ourselves.

And now I want to try a little exercise. Think of that resentment you're holding on to, and picture putting it in the spiritual biohazard container, where it no longer poses a risk to you. Picture closing the lid and sealing it in there. And then picture taking that container and offering it up to God. And don't worry, no matter what's inside, God will who accept it. And once you've made that offering, notice how you're feeling now. Feel your shoulders relax. Let your hands rest in your lap. Sit up straight and open up your ribcage.

Take a deep breath in, hold it for a second, and let it out.

Now, it's going to take more than one little exercise to get rid of resentments, but this was at least a start. Keep at it, and eventually you'll get there. And I promise, when you look at the place where your resentment was amputated, instead of a wound, you'll find a place of healing and joy. Amen.