

Before our regularly scheduled worship was so wonderfully interrupted last week with the musical "It's Cool in the Fire", we were in the middle of the gospel of Mark. We had just reached a turning point in the journey of Jesus, when he first told his followers about his forthcoming passion and death. They did not want to hear this, they wanted more miracles, feedings, good news. They had a lot to learn about discipleship, and Jesus was teaching them. Last week's scheduled reading was about the disciples arguing over who would be the greatest in the Kingdom. In reply to this, Jesus told them that anyone wishing to be first would have to be the servant of all. Then he took a child into his arms saying that those who received the child in his name received him. This was quite a shock to the disciples, since in those times, children had no social standing and were basically considered property. This is where we pick up today. The disciples are gathered around the teaching Jesus, who is still holding that child in his arms:

Mark 9:38 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."
9:39 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.
9:40 Whoever is not against us is for us.
9:41 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.
9:42 "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.
9:43 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.
9:45 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.
9:47 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,
9:48 where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.
9:49 "For everyone will be salted with fire.
9:50 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."

Sermon:

Exclusive offer! This is exclusively for you! Welcome to this exclusive resort! We love that word, don't we? Especially when we are on the inside – when we are at that exclusive restaurant, or part of an exclusive group. I remember a long time ago when I bought airline tickets from a friend who was a travel agent. As a thank you, he threw in

passes to allow my husband and me into an exclusive lounge at an airport during our layover time. I hate to admit it, but there was a part of me that felt important and enjoyed thinking I was part of a special group.

Yet when a journalist once asked American poet Carl Sandburg, "What is the ugliest word in the English language?", Sandburg replied, "Exclusive." I suppose how ugly we find that word might depend upon whether we are among the excluders or the excluded in the exclusive group.

There are a number of reasons why people like to be part of exclusive groups, why they like to exclude. One is the sense of superiority, the sense of importance that comes with being part of a group that not everyone can get into. This may have been part of the reason the disciples were annoyed with those casting out demons in Jesus' name who were not part of their little band. Some of them clearly had big egos. Just before this incident, they had discussed who would be the greatest in the Kingdom. They wanted to know where they stood in the hierarchy of things. The disciples wanted to feel special. They were jealous of others who claimed to be doing Jesus' work because they were the ones following Jesus, and how dare anyone else lay claim to their group. Now their club would not be so exclusive, there would be others whom they had not invited in claiming to be followers of Jesus. The disciples were losing control over their group.

This is the same problem that Moses had with his people. Moses needed some help in dealing with the Israelites on the journey to the promised land. In response, God told Moses to call a group of elders into the tent, where they would be blessed with the ability to prophesy. But two men did not go to the tent, and they were prophesying anyway. Those who had followed the instructions precisely were angry. They did not want anyone outside their group to be recognized as prophets. They, like the disciples, were driven by their egos, wanting to feel special, and to control who was in and who was out of the group.

Besides ego and wanting to feel important, another reason for people to become exclusive is fear. Many are afraid of those they don't know, of those they perceive as different, as "the other." People stay in their own neighborhoods because they are afraid of venturing into the unknown. There are those who have contact exclusively with people who think like they do because they are frightened of new ideas. Others try to close off their families or organizations because they are suspicious of any who are different from themselves. Fear tends to make turn people in on themselves, to make them want to circle the wagons as it were, and protect what they have in order to feel secure.

The disciples in today's scripture were at the point where they had been hearing Jesus talk about his suffering and his death. Their whole vision of what it meant to follow Jesus had shifted. Originally they had expected importance and renown because Jesus would restore the might and power of Israel, and they would be right beside him when he claimed his power, his position of prominence. But now Jesus was changing the rules, he was shifting their foundation. They knew that their fate and Jesus' were

closely connected. Their natural reaction was to form a tight circle around Jesus to protect him, and themselves, and not trust anyone outside that circle.

When we're afraid, we tend to do the same thing. We want to find an enemy, and rally our forces against that foe. Never are people so united and exclusive as when they fight against a common enemy. But these divisions between friend and foe, between us and them are not conducive to the building of God's kingdom. When we begin to judge others by whether they are one of us, or one of the other, we limit our vision. We can no longer see people as complex human beings, but only in terms of narrow definitions. We classify people as "patriotic" or "unpatriotic", as "good" or "evil", as "ally" or "enemy." And as we do this, we decide that all those who are not for us are against us.

But this is not what Jesus says in the gospel. He says that all those who are not against us are for us. He wants to expand our vision, not limit it. When we constrict our vision like the disciples did, we limit our ability to work with others who are doing good in this world. We also miss recognizing miracles that happen around us. The disciples couldn't even appreciate the healings that were happening in Jesus' name because they were so busy focusing on the fact that those performing the miracles were not part of their group.

Jesus would have none of this. He made it abundantly clear that he and his followers are not a little clique. He saw the world from God's point of view, one that knows that God's actions are not limited by the perceptions of narrow vision, one that sees all small acts – even that of giving water to a thirsting soul – as part of God's work in this world.

This is what I see as the key to understanding Jesus' strange and disturbing sayings about cutting off parts of our bodies which cause us to sin. This was not actually some sort of violent initiation ritual required to get into the kingdom of God. Obviously, Jesus was using figurative language in making his point.

He says "If your eye causes you to stumble, cut it out." The way I read it is that Jesus is asking us to in a sense, remove our eyes and replace them with God's eyes – to see things from God's perspective instead of our own. He is asking us to consider how we can change the way we look at things to be more in line with the way God perceives things. The disciples had to expand their vision of who could be included in ministry to include others besides themselves who were working towards the good. They had to expand their view of who was worthy to be cared about and concerned about to include children, and others who were seen as less than fully human in their society. They had to take a new look at what it meant to be first in the kingdom, at what the priorities are for followers of Jesus. Jesus asks us to change the way we look from our own narrow point of view, to God's broader, more inclusive point of view.

He also asks us to cut off our hand if it causes us to stumble. Here again, what would it mean to replace our hands with the hands of Jesus. Jesus' hands did not cling tightly to material objects. They were not used to keep others away, to hurt people. He used his hands for giving food and drink to the hungry, for healing the sick, for welcoming the excluded, and for holding and embracing the lowly of society. He reached out to others, and he reached out to God with his hands.

Jesus also mentions cutting off our foot. If we were to replace our feet with those of Jesus, what would that be like? Jesus followed the path of God. He let God lead him to the places where people were in need. He walked to places where he was not welcomed and he eventually walked to Jerusalem, where he met his own death. But he was not dragged or lured by other people. He had a sense of mission, and followed God's call in his life.

Jesus' whole life was about being more inclusive. He opened his eyes to see the worth of people that those in his culture deemed unworthy. His hands reached out to help feed and heal those beyond his small band of disciples. His feet took him to minister to those in places his followers did not want to go.

This morning we have a tangible glimpse of people in this community following Jesus in this way. CROP Hunger Walk provides an opportunity to walk with the world. Those who participate in the walk do so to be in solidarity those who struggle for their very existence. Hungry people in developing countries typically walk as much as 10 kilometers each day to get food, water, and fuel, and to take their goods to market. The CROP Hunger Walk is **C**ommunities **R**esponding to **O**vercome **P**overty in an annual event to raise money for hungry people throughout the world. We honor and bless those who are willing to walk today, to work with others to make a difference.

We want to offer our blessing and support to those from our community who are participating in the CROP Walk. We thank you for representing Bainbridge Community United Church of Christ in this effort. Will you please rise for a blessing – Let us pray:

Holy God – We ask your blessing upon those who walk today in the CROP Walk in response to your call of servanthood. We thank you for their eyes, which see a vision of the world where the hungry are fed. We thank you for their hands, which unite with others as they reach out to help those less fortunate. We thank you for their feet, with which they will walk in solidarity with those who must walk for their very survival. Bless their generous spirits, give success to their efforts, and may they be a sign of hope for all they help, and all who support them. Amen.

Saint Theresa of Avila once said:

Christ has no body now but ours,

No hands, no feet on earth but ours.

Ours are the eyes through which he looks
compassion on this world.

Ours are the feet with which he walks to do good.

Ours are the hands with which he blesses
all the world.

Ours are the hands, Ours are the feet, Ours are the eyes.

Christ has no body now on earth but ours - -

We are the Body of Christ.

May we be the eyes, the hands and the feet of Christ as we serve the world.

Amen.