

The Gospel of Mark is the shortest of the four gospels, since Mark rarely minces words. Mark's basic approach is that of a story-teller who is breathless with excitement. The word "immediately" is used repeatedly throughout the gospel... Mark wants us to grasp what happens and make a decision about Jesus for our lives without procrastination. Today a popular phrase goes: "Just do it." When it comes to following Jesus, Mark would agree.

Today's lesson has some pretty big challenges for anybody who would be a Christian. Perhaps you noticed that in today's reading, it is the disciple John who seems out of sync with Jesus. Last week it was all the disciples, as they argued among themselves about who of them was the best. The week before that, it was Peter, when he couldn't handle Jesus' suggestion that as Messiah he would have to suffer and die. And in the tenth chapter of Mark, James and John will try to get Jesus to promise them special status when Jesus comes into his glory, proving that James and John had very little understanding as to what Jesus was really about.

Remember that it was Peter, James, and John who received special treatment from Jesus when he took them up the mountain and let them witness the Transfiguration. They were allowed to see more than the other disciples, and yet, as gospel-writer Mark would surely want us to notice, they were the very ones who "messed up" the most. They didn't understand, they were competitive, they were out for their own skins, and they wanted to shut out folks who were doing things in Jesus' name without being in their circle.

In the face of this, Jesus gave them some strong warnings. Whatever is keeping you from doing the will of God, as shown through Jesus, get rid of it. He used the image of a hand or an eye, but today we might label things that keep us from really being serious about Jesus things like: procrastination (some day I will get serious about this religion stuff), selfishness (I want to live my life MY way), competitiveness (I won't share with him or her because MY standards of education, status, monetary worth, decency, whatever, are not being met), love of money (I cannot take Jesus seriously, because he might want me to do something expensive with what I have)....

If your right hand keeps you from the Lord, cut it off... If your eye makes you blind to God, pluck it out. Radical stuff, that's what Jesus offered. The message is this: NOTHING is more important than being in relationship with God. Says preacher Richard Donovan: "Jesus' sayings challenge us to examine the quality of our discipleship. Is following Christ at the core of our being, something too precious to be surrendered lightly? Or is our Christianity merely a matter of taste or convenience" (Perkins, 641). Discipleship does sometimes require amputations. We need to amputate bad habits -- resentments or ambitions that cause us to act unethically. The recovering alcoholic or drug addict needs to amputate old relationships that threaten to pull him/her back to a life of addiction. The rich young ruler needed to amputate his wallet. We need to amputate things that stand between us and God. These references to hell are difficult for many Christians today, but they draw our attention to the holiness and justice of God, which are as real as the grace of God. This is the only reference to hell and its torments in Mark's Gospel, and please note that it is *disciples* who are in danger rather than unbelievers. Both the stumbling Christian and the Christian who causes others to stumble are subject to judgment." (The above paragraph edited from R.

So what keeps US from getting serious about the Lord in our lives?

The disciples were upset that somebody else was casting out demons when they themselves had just had trouble doing so.... And the guy was using Jesus' name!! How dare he! ... We can probably relate to this. Time and again I have had to talk to myself when a church member who is ill tells me that he or she is going to a healing service at some other church or revival. My self-worth is immediately called into question as I wonder if the other pray-er will have more success in getting the person healed by God than I have had. This sort of reaction is part of my sin, where I become more concerned with myself than with the well-being of others.

Jesus didn't have concern about somebody else doing good works in his name, and he challenged the disciples who did. The hope of the Gospel is that everybody can come to know the love of God as given through Jesus Christ. Next to that, nothing else will matter for long. By our poor witnesses and our obsession with our own wants, wishes, prejudices and desire for status, though, we CAN cause persons who are new in the faith to stumble. They can see that our eyes are not on our Lord, but on ourselves. This is true for paid pastors, but it is also quite true when it comes to church members. When we quarrel or fight, we make it hard for others to see the love of Christ as a reality. When we refuse to forgive, within and outside of the church, we keep others from experiencing the incredible power available when a person dares to do what Jesus taught. When we deny Christ through our business practices or the way we act in school or our tactics in political arenas or our thoughtless driving on neighborhood streets, we bring God's condemnation down upon ourselves. This is serious and very tough stuff.

On a larger scale, the Christian church needs to watch its witness. Jesus challenged his disciples to an inclusive vision. "Whoever is not against us is for us" (v. 40). We need to hear this as the Christian church finds itself so fragmented along many lines -- denominational, doctrinal, racial, socio-economic, national, liberal/conservative, social-action/evangelical, and charismatic/non-charismatic. We are always tempted to regard Christians on the other side of whatever line we have drawn as inferior or too radical -- or not really Christian at all. **Danger:** when Christians deal with each other in ways based on criticism or mean-spirited competition, we have failed to deal with each other based on what binds us together, our Lord Jesus Christ. This is as true today as it was in Jesus' day.

"Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?" (v. 50a). Salt is good because it makes food palatable and functions as a preservative. Pure salt does not lose its saltiness, but salt found on the shores of the Dead Sea is often so intermixed with impurities that it can no longer season or preserve. Such salt serves as a metaphor for disciples who become adulterated with the world's values -- thus losing both their faith-flavor and their ability to make a difference in the world. (From Richard Donovan, Sermonwriter.com)

As I was preparing for this sermon, I hoped to find a good story to bring everything together and leave us feeling good but challenged. The story I share with you now is not what I thought I was searching for, but once I read it and then read through other illustrations, it kept coming back to

me. This story is entitled, “The Mirror,” and I found it in Wayne Rice’s book, *Hot Illustratinos for Youth Talks*. It was first told by author Robert Fulgham about one of his professors, Alexander Papaderos.

At the last session on the last morning of a two-week seminar on Greek culture, Dr. Papaderos turned and made the ritual gesture: “Are there any questions?”

Quiet quilled the room. These two weeks had generated enough questions for a lifetime, but for now, there was only silence. “No questions?” Papaderos swept the room with his eyes.

So, I asked. “Dr. Papaderos, what is the meaning of life?”

The usual laughter followed, and people stirred to go. Papaderos held up his hand and stilled the room and looked at me for a long time, asking with his eyes if I was serious and seeing from my eyes that I was. “I will answer your question.”

Taking his wallet out of his hip pocket, he fished into a leather billfold and brought out a very small round mirror, about the size of a quarter. Then he said something like this:

“When I was a small child, during the war, we were very poor and we lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place. I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone, I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine – into deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find.

*“I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child’s game but a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of light. But light – truth, understanding, knowledge – is there, and **it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it.***

“I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world – into the black places in the hearts of men – and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of life.”

And then he took his small mirror and, holding it carefully, caught the bright rays of daylight streaming through the window and reflected them onto my face and onto my hands folded on the desk.

We are here because we have chosen, on some level, to follow Jesus Christ. If we have so chosen, then we are asked to let our very lives be used to share the Light of the World with others. If we refuse, we blow it and we hurt others and even hurt ourselves as we prevent folks from

experiencing the love of God. This is serious stuff. It's life, and it's for life. May we all get serious and let the blessing God has given this world in Christ Jesus shine through our lives and season life for others. In Jesus' name, Amen.