

A story: Little River Community Church was located just down the street from First Memorial Church. Since they were so geographically close in a small town, the two youth groups from the two churches often competed with each other. They participated in the same softball league, the same basketball league, and had become serious rivals. Little River Community was always trying to outdo First Memorial and vice versa.

One Sunday, following a Bible study on serving others, the youth group at Little River Community Church decided to go out into their community and put their faith into action. The youth pastor organized the kids into “Ministry teams” and challenged them to go out and serve others. They could do anything – but they needed to remember one thing: “Do what Jesus would do.”

Off they went! One group washed cars for people up and down the street. Another group went to a convalescent home and sang songs to the residents there. Later in the afternoon, all the ministry teams returned to the church to report what they had done. One of the groups told how they had gone to help a woman who lived close to First Memorial Church. When they mentioned First Memorial, everybody groaned. “We mowed grass, raked leaves, and did other yard work for her,” said one of the students. “She was really nice. After we finished, she invited us in and prayed for us. And then she said, ‘You young people from First Memorial Church are always doing such nice things for us old folks.’”

“Oh, no!” said the youth pastor. “She thought you were from First Memorial? I hope you set her straight! Did you tell her that you were not from First Memorial but from Little River Community?”

“Well, no, we didn’t,” said the student. “You told us to do what Jesus would do, didn’t you? We decided that Jesus would just keep his mouth shut and not try to get the credit.” (*More Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks*, Wayne Rice, pp. 19-20, edited by fte)

In today’s Gospel lesson, the disciples were upset that folks who were not in their group were casting out demons and helping people in Jesus’ name. Jesus basically told his disciples not to get their “drawers in a wad” over it, that such things would work out in God’s ways. And then Jesus moved on to offer even more of a challenge to his followers.

“If your hand offends you, cut it off...It is better to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown in to hell.” These sentences in today’s gospel lesson have always bothered me. Jesus’ response seems so radical. It is meant to jolt the disciples, and us, into life-giving sanity.

When Jesus made the radical statements about cutting off hands and feet or plucking out eyes, he was challenging his followers to see that faith is essential. Jesus was asking us to look at the very center of existence and see what it is that truly matters. If we have such a need to get credit, to compete, to do things our own way, we’re putting our focus and energy on the wrong

thing. "It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell." There must be priorities in life and faith. While hands, feet, and eyes are terribly important to us, there must be an even greater priority - life with God. This may seem radical, but it would speak to us right where we are complacent and sloppy with our religion. Jesus Christ would have us "Wake up" and realize that God is "dead serious" about every moment of our lives.

The word "radical" is an uncomfortable word these days. We now hear about "radical Islam" and for most of our lives have heard about "radical Christians," usually depicted to us as those holding signs yelling "REPENT" on street corners, or too often a group of Christians condemning others for not believing the right way. That kind of "YOU ARE DEAD WRONG" radical Christianity can make it rather unappealing for a person to want to be "DEAD RIGHT."

But the word "radical" as found in the dictionary is not dangerous or subversive or obnoxious at all. It is defined as "relating to the root or foundation; essential; fundamental." It means at the very heart and center of things, at least in its original meaning, which comes from the Latin root meaning "from the center."

Both of the scriptures we heard today would point us toward the root or foundation, that which is most meaningful for human beings, radical relationship with God. All of us want a relationship with God, but too often we think WE are in charge.

Hear again James 4:13-17: 'Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money." {14} Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. {15} Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that." {16} As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. {17} Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.'

God's Word calls us to get radical. Radical, not in the sense of the fanatic who has placed ideals and sometimes even doctrines in the place of God. Radical in the sense of letting God be at the center of our lives.

Author Jes Lair, who some years ago wrote his own story with the catchy title, "I Ain't Much, Baby, But I'm All I Got," told of how his life was radically changed. When he was thirty-five years old, and an advertising executive, he thought he had the world's greatest plan for his life. He would work hard for a few more years, even though he detested the business he was in, make a lot of money, and then retire early. A good plan, but he suddenly had a heart attack.

Jes survived the heart attack. He did more than survive. He discovered something more at the center of his life. His heart somehow spoke to his head and said, "Look, if you are crazy enough to throw your whole life down a rat hole chasing something you don't believe in, that's fine. You can throw your whole life away for money and material gains. But this Norwegian heart, it's not going to go along with you." While in the hospital, Jes had time to review his life goals. He discovered he had gone a long way down the wrong path making a series of rotten, sick,

destructive choices. He made a resolution: From that time on, he was never again going to do something in which he didn't deeply believe. He found a new freedom, a new purpose, a new life. He got radical. He went back to the center and found out what life is all about.

We cannot say that we will be different tomorrow, that tomorrow we will start something good tomorrow, that soon we can begin living the way we know we ought to live. We deceive ourselves, tomorrow is an illusion. A book entitled, I'll Quit Tomorrow tells how an alcoholic will tell himself that tomorrow he will quit, that things will be different tomorrow, that today is the last day he will drink. But the tomorrow he envisions never comes, it's always a day away. And yesterdays problems come with us. We can only live in the todays we are given until we have no more. As Jes Lairs discovered, the only time we have to experience life is NOW.

The entire Bible is an invitation for God's people to get radical, NOW. To discover, in case we have lost it, the center of life in God's love. This may mean having to clean house, make some cuts, even painful ones. It probably won't mean losing a hand, or an eye, or a foot, but it could mean rearranging priorities, putting aside whatever it is in life that keeps us from loving God and from living the love of God for others. Love of money, addiction to busy schedules, fear of other people...Whatever it is that keeps us from perceiving the needs around us and our own need for something beyond ourselves - God.

I've got plans for tomorrow, and for next week, and for next year...and hopes, and worries. But most important, and most difficult, is realizing and remembering that it is all a gift, all from the hand of God, all leading me forward and pleading with me to know this Source from whom cometh every good and perfect gift.

"Anyone who knows the good he ought to do, and doesn't do it, sins." (James 4:17) Another story: A very rich man prided himself on being, also, a devout and good man. He made a point of leading family prayers each morning, covering much of the world's need. One morning he prayed, as he had on previous occasions, for an aged couple who lived near his big estate. These people were poor and ill, and in need of expert medical attention. When the morning prayers were completed, the rich man's nine-year-old son asked his father if he had stopped to see the old couple for whom he prayed. When the father said, "No," the boy said, "Dad, I wish I had your money." "Why," asked his dad; and the boy answered, "Because, if I had your money, I would answer your prayers!" (source unknown)

"Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other." Salt is a preservative, a cleanser, a seasoning. Salt is to this day a symbol of honor, hospitality, and friendship in the Middle East. In the Old Testament, salt is a symbol of the everlasting covenant. So Jesus was telling us, "Don't lose the essence of your being; don't lose the everlasting quality of your life which has been given you by your Creator. Be radical, centered, peaceful, and productive in the Everlasting Arms." By the gracious love of God and the power God makes available to us through the Holy Spirit, may we dare to let this be reality for us! Emmanuel: God really is with us. May WE be radically centered on trusting and walking with God! Amen.