

## **"You Want a Piece of Me?"**

A sermon by Rev. Dr. Wylie V. Hughes  
Sunday, September 26, 2021

Scripture Reading: Mark 9:38-50 (NRSV)

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." 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. 40 Whoever is not against us is for us. 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.

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. 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. 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. 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, 48 where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

49 "For everyone will be salted with fire. 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."

There I was, on my way to downtown Ammon in Jordan, on a metro bus with my host student named Sultan, listening to the various conversations within earshot and trying to decipher what they were saying. (Very useful exercise if you want to learn a foreign language by the way.) We come to a stop and on walks this very old man dressed like a Bedouins straight from the desert. Soon as the door closes behind him, he turns to address the passengers in a loud, commanding voice. But he is speaking so fast that I couldn't follow. So, I leaned over to ask Sultan what he was carrying on about. Sultan chuckled and said, "oh he is just a crazy old Bedouin ranting about the end of the world and how we should get our houses in order before the day of Judgment." My first thought was wow, I thought doomsday preachers was an American Christian thing! I guess Muslims have them too.

Then, as he was speaking, he would quickly reach up and slap himself in the face at random. And I mean hard enough to make a red mark on his wrinkled face. And a couple of the passengers started snickering at the spectacle, which I thought was just as odd. So again, I leaned

over and asked Sultan what was he saying now? Sultan replied “He is warning about the dangers of a wandering eye and how it can lead one to lust and corruption. And I was like, “Why is that so funny?” He said: “Oh THAT’S not funny at all! What *is* funny is that his own eye is wandering to that pretty lady standing over there.” Sultan pointed to an extremely beautiful young lady standing by the door. He saw my perplexed face and then explained: “In the Qur’an it says if your right eye offends you then pluck it out. This guy is CLEARLY offended by his right eye!”

Ok, so that *was* funny. But I couldn’t shake the feeling I had heard that somewhere before. So, I blew the dust off of my bible and I found this morning’s passage. I was amazed at how two different faiths draw from the same well of wisdom. And how similar is the price of admission.

If anyone tells you that being a Christian is easy, they are lying and probably trying to sell you something. If you are doing it right, following Jesus is one of the toughest things you will ever do. Not because of the punishments of hell which, by the way is a very lazy and unimaginative reason to follow Christ. It is tough because the cornerstone of Christ’s Gospel is sacrifice. I mean Jesus set the ultimate bar for all his followers when he gave his life on the cross. And he admonishes all of us all to do the same if we say we love Him. I don’t think Christ wants us to just give our lives freely for the sake of others and he surely didn’t mean for us to literally tear out our eyes and chop off various body parts in his name. But I know a few so called Believers who would rather lop off an arm before they change their bad habits. And we all know a few so called Christians who would rather lose an eye than to see the error in their ways, and make amends.

The toughest part of discipleship is having the willingness to lose a part of yourself. “If your right eye causes you to stumble, tear it out” is an intentionally shocking and grotesque metaphor for the act of removing the pieces, the aspects of us, our flaws, our shame, guilt, hatred and resentment; all the little things that no longer serve our greater good. Noted African American author, playwright and Civil Rights activist James Baldwin once said: “I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.” Discipleship in Christ means facing the darkness that lurks in our hearts,

to confront it, to wrestle with it and to reconcile with it. And sometimes we have to die to it. To die to what you were and have the courage to allow God to shape you into who He meant you to be.

This is heavy, I know! But I'm here to tell you that the burden of discipleship is so worth it when you consider its perks! Once you face that darkness and overcome it, you get filled with all this light! It's like the love of God radiates from every pore of your body! Once you decide to look past your fear and guilt and shame and bitterness and envy and anger and then take the leap of faith, you find out just how awesome God is! You see miracles everywhere your step! Purpose and destiny follow you like a shadow! That new you that God shaped you into, is a good you! You walk different, you talk different, you think different!

And then guess what? You have to do it all over again! You reach a new high and find a new (or old) darkness creep into your heart, weighing you down and holding you back. True discipleship in Christ means facing that dragon and slaying it over and over again until Christ returns! And yes, you get weary sometimes. There will be so many times where you will ask God what is the point? Why am I laboring in this vineyard of rotting grapes? You will get tired of the emptiness you feel after losing so many pieces of yourself. You might even beg to go back to the way you used to be, just to fill those voids. And Christ will answer: "Do you want a piece of me?" Christ is our portion! He is big enough to fill those voids! He is abundant enough restore what you lost and give you something better!

Don't be afraid to self-reflect, to face your flaws and to do the work to correct them. Being a disciple of Christ is like being a constant gardener of your soul, always sowing, always pruning, always weeding, always reaping, always planting new seeds until one day you look up and realize that you have created the most beautiful oasis! You will see the fruits of your labor, which will reflect the life you live in Christ and light of Christ that lives in you!