

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
9/30/2012, The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29, Mark 9:38-50

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let me begin with a very solemn verse from this morning's Gospel Lesson. In it, our Lord Jesus warns us to not lead our little ones astray. The verse goes like this:

<sup>42</sup>Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung round his neck and he were thrown into the sea. (Mark 9:38-50, RSV)

This is a verse I take very seriously. All pastors should. It reminds us that in our ministry, souls are at stake and that on the great Judgment Day, we will be accountable for our ministry to them. Indeed, it is not just pastors who should heed this verse, but also parents, Sunday School teachers, and congregational leaders. We do not want the ministry of our congregation to harm the little ones who believe in Jesus -- including us grey-haired little ones who go on believing in Jesus even after all these years.

Jesus, then, continues in this solemn ways. He teaches us that heaven is worth everything. His strong words go this way:

<sup>43</sup>And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. <sup>44</sup><sup>45</sup>And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. <sup>46</sup><sup>47</sup>And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, <sup>48</sup>where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. (Mark 9:43-48, RSV)

I remember that Fr. Richard John Neuhaus once referred to this text. Someone asked him how it was that priests could bring themselves to sexually abuse young people in their charge. I think that Fr. Neuhaus gave the real and true answer. He said that the reason those priests could do that was that they no longer believed in "the worm that dieth not, and the fire that is not quenched." They simply no longer believed.

## BUT DO NOT CUT OFF YOUR HAND

Now, this text speaks of cutting off your hand and foot and plucking out your eye. To this I hasten to say, Don't you dare go around cutting off your hand or your foot or plucking out your eye! Well, maybe there could be an exception, like that young man whose arm got stuck in the canyon wall, and with great courage he cut off his arm in order to survive.<sup>1</sup> But short of some emergency like that, please do not go around maiming yourself. Doing harm to yourself is not what Jesus means.

Now I am not disagreeing with our Lord's preaching. Certainly not! I am just trying to rule out one possible interpretation of it. So, to our Lord's admonition, "If thy hand causes you to sin, cut it off," let us all agree to say, "Ah, but my hand *does not* cause me to sin! It does not cause me to sin and never will. If I sin, it is not because of my hand, but because of the weakness and weariness of my character. It is because of the vice I have let creep into my soul. It is my own fault. It is not the fault of my hand."

I mean, that would be awful, that would be spooky, to have a hand with a mind of its own, causing us to sin! But, fear not. Our Maker has not constructed us so! We do not have wicked hands or feet or eyes. We just have the good hands and feet and eyes our Lord gave us, and we should not put them down or harm them.

No mangling of flesh, then! No deliberate cutting ourselves with razors or self-flogging with whips or any such thing. There is enough misery in this world without us harming our own bodies.

Indeed, let us honor our bodies. Goodness sakes, your bodies are beautiful, each one of you! The mere sight of you lifts the heart of each of us. Do not go around harming your body. We believe in the resurrection of the *body*. How else am I going to recognize you in heaven? We need our bodies. They will be better in the resurrection - "glorified bodies," we believe - but they will still be our bodies, else how in the world could it be *we* who are there? So, let us take to heart the words of St. Paul about our bodies:

<sup>19</sup>Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; <sup>20</sup>you were bought with a price. So glorify God *in your body*. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20, RSV)

## A MAXIMUM SYMBOL

Now that I have gotten that off my chest -- do not go around cutting off your hand or maiming yourself in any way -- let me turn to what I think is a truer interpretation of our Lord's teaching here. I think that Jesus is giving us a maximum symbol for how important it is that we seek holiness of life. It is as if he is saying, "By all that is precious to you, by your very hands and feet and eyes, do

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aron\\_Ralston](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aron_Ralston)

not trade heaven for sin.” He speaks of a stark alternative: selling our souls to Satan, or striving for him - Jesus - and for heaven. He speaks of the direction in which we are trying to go: Are we trying to faithfully follow along with Jesus, or are we settling down and become comfortable in the land of sin? His words about cutting off our hand or foot or eye are akin, then, to his saying about “what does it a profit a person”:

For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? (Matthew 16:26, KJV)

Or, another of his sayings – this time about “treasure”:

<sup>19</sup>Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: <sup>20</sup>But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: <sup>21</sup>For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Matthew 6:19-21, KJV)

These are sayings that ask us to search our souls and to try to rouse ourselves from complacency with sin. “And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off,” then, means “Do not sin,” but with maximum earnestness. It means, fight the good fight of Christian discipleship. Strive onwards for holiness of life like that of Christ Jesus.

## **THERE IS NEED FOR SUCH EXHORTATIONS**

And this side of heaven, there is continual need for such exhortations, for most of us are prone to drowsiness and a kind of romanticism about sin. We think to ourselves, “Well, sin is not so bad. In fact, I have some pretty good memories of sin. Everyone does it! The Bible teaches that we can never be entirely free of sin. So, truth be told, I’d rather like to return to it.”

That is, we are liable to echo the dreamy, lazy sigh of the Israelites in today’s First Lesson. Here they are, free people heading toward the Promised Land. But they get weary along the way, and begin to long for the cruel days back when they were slaves in Egypt:

...and the people of Israel also wept again, and said, “O that we had meat to eat! <sup>5</sup>We remember the fish we ate in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; <sup>6</sup>but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” (Numbers 11:4-6, RSV)

What romanticism! What distortion of reality! They were *slaves* back there in Egypt. They were not free people, but at the beck and call of others, as if they were machines or animals. Their firstborn sons were killed (Exodus 1:16) and the rest of them were being worked to the bone in a deliberate attempt to extinguish the Hebrew race! And now they speak of “the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks.” No wonder Moses is fit to be tied with them:

<sup>13</sup>Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me and say, ‘Give us meat, that we may eat.’ <sup>14</sup>I am not able to carry all this people alone, the burden is too heavy for me. <sup>15</sup>If thou wilt deal thus with me, kill me at once, if I find favor in thy sight, that I may not see my wretchedness.” (Numbers 11:13-15, RSV)

Alas, we poor human beings are capable of this. It is not just the Israelites of old who can long for the good old days of slavery, but you and I can do that too. It is a trick of the devil, who would dearly love to draw us back into the ways of sin, whispering to us continually, “Ah, you should taste the cucumbers there, the melons, the leeks. Yummm!”

## THE GRAND INQUISITOR

This human temptation to cast off freedom and to return to slavery in Egypt is the main subject of one of the most famous chapters in western literature: “The Grand Inquisitor” in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. I had best not linger now to discuss that chapter, except to mention its central theme. Ivan Karamazov expresses the human temptation toward slavery with these words:

I tell Thee that man is tormented by no greater anxiety than to find some one quickly to whom he can hand over that gift of freedom with which the ill-fated creature is born.<sup>2</sup>

St. Paul too warns us about the temptation to fall back into sin, which he considers to be a sorrowful slavery. The apostle pleads with us to throw off slavery to sin in favor of a new kind of bondage, for which he uses the marvelous phrase “slaves of righteousness.”

<sup>17</sup>But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, <sup>18</sup>and, having been set free from sin, have become *slaves of righteousness*. (Romans 6:17-18, RSV)

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<sup>2</sup> Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated by Constance Garnett. Kindle Edition.(p. 278).

## FREELY FOLLOWING JESUS

When we were baptized, we occupied the same position as did the fishermen along the Sea of Galilee long ago. Jesus walked by and summoned us, “Come, follow me.” We have been following ever since, as best we can. And it is with us as it was with those fishermen from long ago: we follow freely, else we do not follow at all. Jesus did not kidnap the fishermen or conscript them. He did not handcuff them to himself or drive them with a whip. They were free to follow him and they were free to leave. And in the moment of crisis, they all left.

<sup>48</sup>And Jesus answered and said unto them, Are ye come out, as against a thief, with swords and with staves to take me? <sup>49</sup>I was daily with you in the temple teaching, and ye took me not: but the scriptures must be fulfilled. <sup>50</sup>And they all forsook him, and fled. (Mark 14:48-50, KJV)

They had followed Jesus, not because of ball and chain, not because of promise of riches, but because of the goodness of their hearts. They were free to leave Jesus, and they did, but to their own sorrow. Indeed, to my mind, one of the saddest lines in the Bible is the one where Peter, who has denied Jesus, says to his fellow disciples, “I go a fishing”:

Simon Peter saith unto them, I go a fishing. They say unto him, We also go with thee. (John 21:3, KJV)

It is like the Israelites in today’s story. They remember the cucumbers and melons of Egypt, and say, “I go back to slavery.”

Like the disciples of old, we follow Jesus freely, or not at all. We follow because of the goodness of our hearts, because we want to align ourselves with his way of love in this world. But no one forces us to follow, and, indeed, we are sometimes tempted to part ways with Jesus. We phrase arguments to ourselves, trying to justify leaving Jesus behind. We take refuge in grand ideas or our individual circumstances. But always, we leave Jesus behind to our own sorrow. And it is always best for us to return.

Let me mention some techniques by which we leave Jesus and head off back to Egyptian slavery. I speak of burdens. I speak of temptations toward giving up the good fight to walk closely with Jesus. I speak of ways of life that somehow function as refuge for us against our Lord’s call to holiness of life. Let me mention three such temptations: (1) abuse of alcohol. (2) the wounds of childhood. And (3) genetic predispositions that make it hard for us to stick closely to Christ.

So, first, alcohol: Alcohol has defeated many good people. It has defeated many strong people. And its inner lure seems to be a desire to alter consciousness. I confess that I might not know what I am talking about here, because though I am a great sinner, I happen not to abuse alcohol. I have never actually had a beer or a

whiskey. I've tasted beer, I love beer commercials, but I don't drink it. Left to my own devices, the only alcohol I would gladly receive is the wine of the Blessed Sacrament. I have never been drawn to alcohol. I could see how drunkenness altered the consciousness and the personality of my college friends way back then, and for all the world, it seemed to me that they were like the Israelites in desert crying, "Let me out of here! I can't stand this anymore. Let me escape into some other state." No! Let us stand fast. Let us take reality straight. We have responsibilities and opportunities lying before us. Let's put it this way, "If drugs and alcohol harm your ability to love your family and your neighbors, then cut them off and pluck them out. It is better for you to enter heaven parched of drugs and alcohol than to enter hell drunk out of your mind." Note, I say, "if." If drinking does not harm your discipleship, then fine. But if it does, try to back off from it.

Second, the wounds of childhood: We are blessed to live in a city with great doctors and psychotherapists and wise friends to help us along in case we are suffering from a bad childhood. Such struggles are holy ground that I hesitate to talk about in broad terms. But maybe I can suggest this: Even if we have had a bad childhood, try not to let that bad childhood rob us of a good future. Let us not say, "I cannot walk with Christ because I was damaged by my bad experiences, and I suspect that Christ wants only healthy people to walk with him." Do not say that because it is not true. It is one of the most precious sayings in the Bible that "Jesus is a friend to sinners." He loved the lame, the blind, the deaf, the dumb, the possessed, the insane, the outcast, the tax collector, the adulterer. So, if we have been damaged in any way by our past experiences, let us try to boldly march forward into the freedom of Christ. Let us join that motley crowd of folks who follow Jesus, and in following him, bit by bit became better. Let us not try to flee back to Egypt, sighing and saying that we are not suited for Jesus, because each of us suited for him! He desires each of us. So proudly walk ahead with him.

And finally, let me mention built-in burdens that tempt us to take refuge in them, like siren voices singing, "You do not need to keep walking with Christ. You can take refuge in the idea that you are different from other folks." For example, suppose you were born with a fiery temper. Scientists might even be able to point to some rare genetic combination associated with your fierce temper. It wasn't your environment that made you so feisty. You were just born that way. Well, let it be so. Nonetheless, do not try to evade our Lord's call to love and peace by saying, "But I am an explosive person. I get mad quick, and my anger burns hot." I do not doubt that that is so. I am simply saying that you suffer a burden that other folks are spared, but try with all your might to not let that burden be your undoing. If you have a fiery temper, work hard at controlling it. Don't let it do you or your neighbors harm.

In general, you and I are made for Jesus. We are made to walk with him and to love this world as he loves this world. Sin disrupts this walk. Sin is like Egypt calling to us: "Come back! Come back and enjoy my cucumbers and melons and leeks." Close your ears to that luring cry back to slavery. Let us enjoy the

adventure that lies before us each day to be “little Christs” in this world for the welfare of our neighbor and for the nobility of our own souls. Let it be with us as St. Paul said:

For *freedom* Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1, RSV)

Through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.