

**“Removing Obstacles”**

**Mark 9.38–50**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 28 Sep 03**

I know what you're thinking: “This is too weird: last week he talks about taking up your cross, and this week, he's talking about amputating your own body parts.” This is one of those passages of scripture that you can tell **wasn't** written in our culture. It seems positively barbaric, doesn't it? In some ways it has echoes of the story of that hiker last winter who hacked off his own arm because it was pinned beneath a boulder, which allowed him to escape.

Over the centuries, there has been a sense in which this series of amputations described in Mark's gospel has been taken literally by some deranged adherents of the Christian faith. Not too long ago, I was reading a book in which a medieval monk emasculated himself because he thought that his libido was an obstacle to his faith. You can “connect the dots” yourself on that one, but somehow, I don't think that's what Jesus had in mind.

Guess what? The Bible is filled with wonderful, sometimes horrifying, powerful, **metaphors!** And this passage is chock-full of them. I think of metaphors as being “verbal stand-ins” that really amplify an idea, rather than just coming out and saying the word. So, what do you think Jesus might be talking about when he mentions hands, feet, and eyes as obstacles to one's faith? (I'm assuming “stumbling” is a metaphor as well, since our hands don't usually cause us to stumble.)

Let me ask the question a different way: what do you do with your hands? [**Show glove**] All kinds of thing, of course. We greet people, make obscene gestures, work, write, eat, caress... In short, hands are for **doing or action**.

What do you do with your feet? [**show map**] You hike, walk, run, pedal, kick, swim... In short, they are your mode of transportation for a **journey**.

What do you do with your eyes? [**show telescope**] You see, glance, observe, perceive, navigate... In short, they help you **envision** where you're going and what you're going to do.

So, perhaps what Jesus is talking about isn't body parts at all, but rather about **action**, our **journey**, and our ability to **envision**.



So, there's a paradigm or a process set up in this list of metaphors: first, there is **you!** Next, there is a **problem** (a stumbling block, something that trips you up). Third, there is a **solution** (namely, excising the impediment, whatever it is).

I was thinking about that surgical metaphor for solving problems, and it occurred to me that I actually hear that pretty frequently at my house, when one of my sons says emphatically to the other, “cut it out!” It's a *metaphor* even my kids use today. So, for all those biblical literalists out there who think that the text means to amputate something, all I can say is, “Cut it out!”



So, we've looked at two parts of the paradigm: the solution, the problems of doing, journeying, and envisioning, but we haven't talked about you.

Rather than asking you to come up to the lectern and share your issues with the whole congregation, I'm going to ask you to spend about five minutes and reflect on some obstacles in your own life – about things that are getting in your way on your spiritual journey. We can call this a guided meditation, if you like, or if that sounds too New Agey for you, think of it as a time of common prayer. So, I'd invite you to get into a

comfortable position, close your eyes if you wish, and take a few deep breaths, opening yourself to the Spirit.

First, think about the love of God surrounding you, entering your body with every breath you take, nourishing your soul. Know that nothing can separate you from the love of God.

Let us focus on **doing**. What actions are you taking in your life that are impeding your spiritual growth? What are you doing that sets up road blocks from becoming the person God intends you to be? Perhaps it is being too busy to attend to your spiritual life. Are you “sweating the small stuff,” and ignoring what is ultimately important? Are you acting for the reign of peace and justice that Jesus came to proclaim? What are you **not** doing, and how does that form a barrier? Is there a failure to love someone? Is there neglect in demonstrating compassion to humankind? Are you unable to put yourself in another’s shoes? What are the things in your life that you’re doing or failing to do that trip you up? [Pause]

Now, imagine if you will, an extraordinarily sharp scalpel, a shining surgical blade. In your imagination, deftly, gently grasp the handle and excise those parts of your doing and acting that are an impediment to you. You might imagine yourself gently cutting around the edge of a tumor that needs to be removed from your self. Just cut it out.

As you remove that mass, ask for God’s help in healing the wound. Not only will you survive this radical surgery, you will grow in new dimensions.

Now, let us turn our attention to our **journeys**. Imagine your spiritual life as a child. Perhaps you were in Sunday school, perhaps not. Think of the spiritual life of your family of origin. Think of growing up: your adolescence, young adulthood. What was happening with you spiritually? How was God present on your journey? You’re growing into full adulthood, perhaps into middle age, perhaps into older age. Where has God been present in your life, and when are the times you’ve felt as though God has been absent?

How have you pursued a relationship with God, and how has God approached you (through others, through music, through nature, through work, through prayer)?

All of us have journeys with narrow passages and hairpin turns, and even what seem like dead ends. Are there times when your journey has taken you down dark alleys? The unsafe places of addiction, grief, mental or physical illness? How have you turned around and journeyed on in a new path? Perhaps you’re still trying to find a way out. Has your journey led you in pursuit of things other than God? Fame, power, fortune? If you went up the wrong road, how did you get back on track?

Where do you need to go next to find connection with the Spirit? How do you chart the course for the next leg of the race? God has equipped you with three tools: a chart, a red marker, and a compass. In your imagination, look back at the places where you’ve been and didn’t want to go. You can’t erase those parts of your journey, but you can learn from them. And if you are in one of those dead-end places, there is a way out. It may not be obvious to you now, but keep studying the chart; use the compass for direction; make plans for your journey and commit to them by marking them with the red pen.

If you’re using the wrong map, take out your scalpel, and delicately slice it into ribbons. Once you’ve done that, you have the ability to carry and use a new chart. Or if there is a road block on your map, carefully use your scalpel to cut it neatly out of your map, and then move on.

Ask for God's presence and help as a traveling companion on your journey. You don't have to do this journey alone. God is with you, and so is this congregation.

Finally, let us turn our attention to **envisioning**. How do we see our path rightly and clearly? How do we step from meaningless, unproductive efforts into lives that are rich, fulfilling, and life-giving to ourselves and others?

Think of a time in your life when you have felt most fully alive. Perhaps it was being enraptured by a new love; maybe it was finding the work that satisfied your soul; it could be hearing a piece of music that swept you off your feet; it might even have been an experience of the holy. What was it for you that introduced that moment of bliss and meaning? Have you struggled to recapture that moment?

God has given you the tools of vision. But, you need to ask for God's aide in seeing. What is God calling you to do? Perhaps you're called to minister to others through the calling/caring ministry of this church. Maybe you're called to visit our mission partners in Venezuela. What is your vision of the kingdom of God? How do we move toward that liberating reign? What is your vision of being a co-creator with God?

What is clouding your vision? Are you too busy focusing on the mistakes of the past to open your eyes to the present and to a new future? Is there some nagging spiritual question that keeps blocking your sight? Welcome the question and then look beyond it. Find out what is leaving fingerprints on your lenses of envisioning and then gently rub them off.

Perhaps you have a serious problem and can't envision a future because cataracts are obscuring your sight. Are they the cataracts of guilt, shame, greed, self-centeredness? Now is the time to use your imaginary scalpel and using a very deft surgeon's hand, open your eye and remove the cataract. God has given you new lenses for a new vision of the future. What do you see? What can you envision as a way forward? [Pause]

You've used the tools God has provided. You may take them with you and use them anytime you wish, as you act, journey, and envision.

May the healing spirit of the risen Christ, present in us all, be active in you today, bringing wholeness to your action, your journey, and your vision. Amen.



I hope that was a fruitful exercise for you. I don't know if that's exactly what Jesus had in mind, but that's one way to take a 2,000-year-old piece of literature, rich in wisdom and metaphor, and put it to use today. If scripture is viewed only in the context in which it was written, it stays an ancient text. But, if we can use it to extract wisdom and use it as a tool to get at some spiritual roadblocks, scripture comes alive.

Self-mutilation and physical amputation has nothing to do with the scripture. But, being able to amend our action, our journey, and envision the future is a central aspect of what we are about as the church. As I said last week, we are about the business of transformation of lives and of the world. And we must start on ourselves to remove the barriers on which we stumble.

May God be our guide, Christ be our example, and the Spirit be our inspiration as we move together toward the kingdom of God.

Amen.

BENEDICTION

May the God of transformation open up new possibilities in your life; and may we have the courage to remove the obstacles that keep us from being the people God calls us to be.

Amen.