

Mark 9:38-50

More than 600,000 people died during the Civil War. But that number would have been much higher were it not for the doctors and their make-shift hospitals. Piled in heaps behind these hospitals, which were always close to the fighting, were limbs--arms and legs of the soldiers. These limbs were cut off in order to save lives. Canon explosions and musket balls ripped into the soldier's bodies, and to stop the infection and save the rest of the body, the doctors had no choice but to amputate the offending body part. Many soldiers came home from the War on crutches, or in wheelchairs. But at least they came home.

According to Jesus' words in our text, churches that bear His name and which, therefore, are spiritual hospitals, should have, somewhere on their premises, the same kinds of piles--hands, feet, and eyes heaped up--all cut off from the church members who sin. And since we all have used our hands, feet, and eyes to sin, our body parts should be a part of that pile. And yet, nowhere in Scripture are pastors instructed to use scalpels, saws, or hatchets. But we are commanded to use the "sword of the Spirit," which is the Word of God.

Now if you are one who comes here to church faithfully, and listens attentively, then you know for a fact that you will leave here today covered with blood. But it will not be your blood; it will be the blood of Jesus your Savior. God's Word will be used like a scalpel on you as you hear His accusing Law. But the good news of Jesus will heal your wounds...each and every one of them.

"If your hand causes you to sin..." says Jesus. And whose hand has never reached for that which is wrong? Whose feet have never taken him or her where they should not have gone? Whose eyes have never looked and coveted, and lusted? I'm guilty, and so are you. But there's a problem here. If we cut off our hands and feet, will we sin less than we do now? If we cut out our eyes, will we no longer have sinful desires in our heart? Ah...there's the key! It's the heart. Jesus nowhere says, "Out of the eyes come all kinds of covetousness," or "Out of the hands comes murder." He says, "*Out of the heart,*" comes all such wickedness. A man with no legs, no arms, no eyes, and no ears is just as sinful as everyone else, for he still has a heart. We judge people based upon what they do with their hands and feet, and what they look at with their eyes. But God looks at the heart, and He says, "*There is none that is good; no, not one.*"

Even if you could keep your hands, feet, and eyes from doing wrong, within your heart you are a murderer, and a thief, and an adulterer...and so am I. So what we need here in our church is not a place to pile up hands, feet, and eyes. We need a place to put our filthy hearts. For if you are to be saved; if your eternal soul is to be saved from destruction, then your sinful heart must be cut out and die with all sins and evil lusts.

But no one wants to die. We resist it. Even a death that is necessary. Even to save our eternal soul from perishing, we resist dying to sin. We do not like to repent--because that is what dying to sin is. Repentance is returning to our baptism through Confession and Absolution so that our sinful heart--the Old Adam within us--drowns and dies daily with all sins and evil lusts. And we resist it. Young people like to fasten their eyes on things that are wrong; things they should not look at--and so do older people. We like to use our hands to do things that we know are wrong and sinful. We like to use our feet to go to places where we know, as God's people, we should not be, and to stay away from where we should be. We who are sinners, resist dying to sin.

But it does not get any more deadly serious than this. A Civil War soldier with gangrene in his leg may have fought hard to keep his leg. He may have resisted the doctor holding the ax in his hand. But in the end, it had to be. To save the man's life, his leg had to be cut off. And Jesus puts it in just those terms for us. Those who refuse to repent will perish forever. Those who resist the Holy Spirit, who refuse to hear the Word of God--through which He works in us, or who hear that Word but refuse to let God's Spirit turn them away from their sins and lusts, will perish.

But friend, this is not what God wants for you. "*It is better for you...*" says Jesus, not to perish in hell, but for you to repent and be saved. God knows how your sinful flesh resists dying to sin. So He did something about that. He sent His Son, Jesus, to die for you. Jesus took your sins, all of them, even those sins you want to hold on to, the ones you hate to give up, and He went to a bloody cross in your place. Jesus' hands, which never did anything wrong, were thrust through with nails. Jesus' feet, which walked only in the way of innocence, were nailed to a cross. Jesus' eyes, which looked only with love upon sinners, were closed in death. Though His heart was pure and holy, He was sent to His death. He was abandoned by God in hell. And all this for you. So that now, in Jesus, there is something better for you. Because you are baptized into His death and resurrection, you are given a new heart, a clean heart, Jesus' heart. He takes your filthy heart and He gives you His. No matter how far you have wandered away from your baptism, you can return to those blessed waters today. No matter how filthy your heart has become, Jesus gives you a new heart which is pure and holy before God because He forgives all the sin and lust within your heart.

And as you, the Baptized, come up to Jesus' Holy Supper, your feet which bring you forward, are forgiven. Your hands, into which Jesus' body is placed, and which make the sign of His cross over your forgiven heart as you depart in peace, your hands are forgiven. Your eyes, which behold the bread and wine in which your Savior comes to you, your eyes are forgiven. This is the place in our church...the place where, not hands, and feet, and eyes are cut off and piled up, but where they are forgiven through Jesus' death and resurrection. This is the place where filthy hearts are exchanged for new ones; where Jesus takes your sinful heart and gives you His.

But understand this...you and I are much like the Civil War soldiers. We fight against sin out there on the front lines, and we get all bruised and bloodied. The battle makes us weary. And so we come here to Jesus' hospital and He cuts out of us what is dead and dying, and He restores your soul, He gives you new life, He forgives you. And He sends you back out there into the world to fight the good fight, to stay the course. And if you haven't figured it out yet, listen carefully. We cannot fight without Jesus. We cannot win without Him. And so we must come here to the place of forgiveness, the place of healing. We must come faithfully. Because when the war is finally over, even though you will be cut up and bruised; even though you will be on crutches or in a wheelchair...because of Jesus, and through Him alone, when the war is over, you know that you will, for a fact, be going home. Amen.