

Midweek Lent #1 March 4, 2009 Matthew 5: 21-20 The Good Shepherd

*If Your Eye Causes You to Sin, Pluck It Out*

Mark Twain is supposed to have said, “It’s not what I don’t know about the Bible that scares me, it’s what I do know.” And W.C. Fields is supposed to have been reading the Bible on his deathbed; he said he was looking for loopholes.

Our theme for this series of Lenten sermons is “The Hard Sayings of Jesus.” More than 25 years ago F.F. Bruce, a well-respected British Evangelical Bible scholar, wrote a book by that title. In his introduction to the book he noted that both people in Jesus’ own time found and people today find some of Jesus’ sayings “hard.” When we describe these sayings as “hard” we can mean several different things.

For us today, some sayings of Jesus can be hard because the Bible is a document from another time and place, and composed in a different language. Jesus probably spoke Aramaic. The gospels were first written in Greek, and later translated into English. Something can be lost in translation. Some of Jesus sayings presuppose that we have an understanding of ancient farming methods, or the politics of Jesus’ time, or the social customs of first century Palestine – things we would not know unless we went out of our way to study them. It’s true that the Bible’s message is, on one hand, plain and simple. But it is also true; on the other hand, that a better understanding of the history and social situation of Bible times can help us mine other treasures from scripture as well.

Not only do time and language differences make understanding what Jesus said difficult sometimes, there are things Jesus said that seem counter to what we would expect. Jesus said some things that strike us as out of character for him. And sometimes Jesus' sayings seem to place too high an expectation on us. Jesus often seems to ask for more than we can give or accept. He challenges us to think, which many people simply refuse to do, and he challenges some of our most dearly held attitudes and dispositions. That's what makes Jesus' sayings really hard.

At the outset of this sermon series I think it would be helpful to say what Lutherans believe about the Bible and what the Bible's overarching themes are. We believe that the Bible is the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and that it is the authority, the "rule and norm," for all our teachings and beliefs. It's not primarily a history book, a science book, a self-help book, or a list of what to do and what not to do. The Bible reveals God to us, and helps establish a relationship between us and Him.

Basically the Bible tells us that God created the universe, and He created human beings in His image. Yet, because of sin, our age-old rebellion, not all is right with the world. Our relationships with God, the earth and one another are fractured. We, and the world, are subject to death and decay. Still, God loves us and will not abandon us. That is why Jesus Christ, both human and divine, came into the world: to put us right with God again. To do this Jesus had to die and rise again. In His great love for us God incorporates us into his family through Holy Baptism. We are part of God's new creation. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God forms us into churches where we gather to praise him and where we serve others, in

anticipation of eternal in God's kingdom. In the meanwhile, we are guided by the written Word, the Bible. The Bible again and again convicts us of our sin, but then also assures of God's forgiveness, and shows us how to lead a God-pleasing life. That's why it's important for us to have a good understanding of the Bible, even Jesus' sometimes cryptic, confusing, shocking, hard sayings.

The first hard sayings of Jesus I submit for your consideration are in Matthew 5:21-30, with special attention to verse 29, "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell." In verse 30 Jesus goes on to say something similar about cutting off your right hand it likewise causes you to sin. Someone suggested that I should preach the sermon this evening wearing an eye patch and a hook from the costume store – and don't think I didn't consider it!

I have often joked that these verses define the true Biblical literalists among us: someone who takes the Bible absolutely literally must have only one eye and one hand. Any Christian who has not plucked out his right eye or chopped off his right hand is a living testimony to the fact that some parts of the Bible are meant to be taken figuratively while other parts are meant to be taken literally. Exactly what parts are literal and which are figurative is open to debate, but we can have more sympathy for those we disagree with once we recognize that none of us are 100% literalists. (And I like the story of the person who was asked what parts of the Bible he read figuratively and which he read literally, to which he replied, "The parts that were intended

literally, I take literally; and the parts that were intended figuratively, I take figuratively.”)

To the very best of our knowledge, no one has ever plucked out an eye or cut off a hand under the influence of Matthew 5:29-30. In the early centuries of the church there was a great theologian named Origen, who under the influence of Matthew 19:12, made himself a eunuch for the kingdom, but that’s another story. Yet, when the Bible was first translated into English and made available to the public, there were churchmen in England who argued that lay readers might take Jesus’ admonition literally and pluck out their eyes. Of course, none did.

So what was Jesus getting at in this saying? A few thoughts: First of all, Jesus takes sin seriously. My indictment of the church in the present age is that it takes sin too lightly. We live in an era of cheap grace where the gospel is frequently interpreted as “you can cheat a little and God will let you get away with it.” That is not what Jesus died for. The loss of a hand or an eye would be a terrible thing, but Jesus says sin, and its consequences, are even worse. Sin is not a trifling thing.

Jesus is also saying there is no excuse for sin. We tend to pardon or condone sinful behavior because of what we see as mitigating circumstances: bad genes, hormonal imbalance, poor early home life, etc. Jesus knows all about these, he sympathizes with these -- and so should we -- but he will not denigrate the law no matter what the circumstances. A sin is still a sin, whatever its cause or motivation. There is a mysterious interconnectedness

between the physical, emotional and spiritual that cannot be denied. Still, we are responsible moral agents, accountable for actions and behaviors. When it comes to a sinful act, Jesus never says, “Don’t worry, what you did is really okay. I don’t mind.” He says, “What you did is wrong. But I love you and can forgive you.” The goal we strive for is to be so in tune with Jesus that we don’t sin at all, or at least sin as little as possible.

Jesus vision for his followers was that their righteousness would exceed that of the Pharisees, and the Pharisees were extremely moral people. Jesus sets the ethical bar high for us. For Jesus sin is not only concrete action, it is also thoughts and attitudes. This hard saying about plucking out the eye comes directly after Jesus’ saying that to look at a woman with lust is the same as committing adultery with her. That’s an instance where the eye can lead one directly into sin. We are reminded of King David who spied Bathsheba while she bathing. What he saw with his eye led him to an adulterous affair with her and the murder of her husband. It would have been better had David plucked out his eye than to have sinned in so great a way.

There is a similar concern in the church and society today about our eyes and sexual sin. I’m talking about pornography, especially internet pornography. Our computers make just about any type of pornography you can imagine, and some you probably cannot imagine, available with just a few keystrokes. This easy availability brings men into the world of pornography who probably never would have ventured there before.

From everything I read and see, this pornography situation is a growing problem. Bishop McCoid felt the need to address this concern with the

pastors of our synod back before he retired. A best selling Christian book called “Every Man’s Battle” addresses pornography addiction. Counselors report that pornography is breaking apart marriages and families. We have seen careers ruined by problems that began with soft pornography and took off from there. This is a situation where it is necessary to figuratively pluck out one’s eye to escape that sin and its destructive consequences. And it’s not just men involved anymore. There was a need for a companion volume to “Every Man’s Battle” called “Every Woman’s Battle.” The hopeful news is that there is help out there for people with pornography problems.

“If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out,” is a hard saying. God, in His mercy, gives us the power to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus in faith. In that way we may be spared dealing with the harshest realities of that statement. Amen.