

If any of you have ever looked at Theology books, the British writer William Barclay always appears with some great writings. In his autobiography he recalls the story of his 21 daughter and her fiancé who were both drowned in a boating accident. Many months later he received an anonymous letter that said: Dear Dr. Barclay, I know now why God killed your daughter; it was to save her from corruption by your heresies. Barclay wrote that, if he had had an address for the sender of the letter, he would have written to that individual, not in anger, but in pity, telling his mean-spirited correspondent ... your god is the god I don't believe in!

In church life I feel the hurt at times at the way in which people can be very quick to point the finger of blame straight back at me. It's as if I'm responsible for everything that happens around here. And someone would respond, why is it not entirely with you? But the truth is that sometimes what might seem like the answer is in fact correct but not what it should be. I think it is very easy and quick to point the finger at the rector because it's not so easy to consider the wider church's part in what goes on around here. That's my little gripe over.

Our gospel reading for today is not one of the most inviting passages to preach on with its graphic language. Jesus' words about millstones around the neck, plucking out an eye, and other forms of self-mutilation are not what I would hope to portray from the Gospel message. Nor obviously should it be taken literally.

As we read these extreme words from Jesus, we need to remember that he was running out of time. These were, in effect, Jesus' last words to his disciples in their native territory around the Galilean Sea. Very soon he will begin his journey south toward Jerusalem and all that would await him there. Jesus is trying to impress upon his disciples – and upon us – that the way we live our lives and our witness to others really does matter. We do not need to earn our salvation, that is a gift from God, but we need to live as people who in love point other people toward Jesus.

I do not believe that Jesus wants us to take him literally when he talks about gouging out an eye or cutting off a hand, but I think he wants us to take him seriously. We certainly are obsessed with physical appearance – maintaining good health, eating the right things, and getting exercise. But Jesus wants us to remember that the spiritual dimension of our life is actually more important than the physical. Our uniqueness as disciples of Jesus is rooted in our identity as servants called to obey him and to welcome others ... particularly for those in society that will not normally get a welcome.

Again and again, Jesus is clear that, as members of the Church on earth, we need to see our role as the host or hostess inviting everyone to enjoy the goodness of God. Jesus wants no bouncers at the door of this party .. no strict adherence to someone else's guest list .. but rather he wants all people welcomed and enfolded into the society. He has harsh words for those who would seek to create limits or barriers, separating those he calls. Beware of those who claim to know the mind of God and feel justified to discriminate or judge.

I think our reading is a powerful call for tolerance and the reservation of judgment. You'll remember some of the disciples were upset that they found a person casting out demons [Mark 9: 38] in Jesus name. They wanted a restraining order against this

unlicensed exorcist, but Jesus demonstrated a delightful patience toward this stranger who was doing good in Jesus' name. Whoever is not against us, our Lord stated, is for us.

How much do we need to reflect on this wisdom at a time when so many in the name of Christianity would set up standards that exclude people. I do believe that being clear about our views is important, but if it is done to exclude people then that is wrong. That is why I have a personal passion to see the Church be about the work of mission ... calling people into a life-transforming relationship with Jesus Christ.

Your god is the god I don't believe in! These wonderful words from William Barclay are a challenge to us as we deal with the powerful teachings in our Gospel lesson where ..

Jesus extols an irregular healer who is accomplishing wonderful things, even if the disciples begrudge him any praise or recognition, Jesus sees great merit (verse 41) in the simple act of offering water to a thirsty person, something that has nothing to do with church membership or doctrine, but everything to do with kindness and compassion

Remember that this setting comes immediately after the discussion of last week where Jesus brings a little child to him and says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me". Jesus again probably with the same children in the room stresses the obligation of protecting the vulnerable, reminding us that there is nothing more terrible than the abuse or neglect of a child. Jesus is warning here that we must not become a stumbling block between a person coming to Christ.

Jesus is once again asking us to look at ourselves, to be self-reflective. Let's also be reflective of the church in which we worship in. It's as if he saying to John, "Don't you worry about that other guy. You worry about yourself." He's asking us to look within. The greatest stumbling blocks are not outside us but within us: anger and revenge, the judgments we make of others, prejudice, our desire to get ahead and be number one, the need to be right, our unwillingness to listen, the assumption that we know more and better than another, living as if our way is the only and right way. Let's be humble in our acceptance that we have not arrived fully ourselves yet, and therefore not so quick to judge the other person. Instead just keep pointing yourself to Jesus so that others may see Jesus through you.

In what ways have we caused ourselves or someone else to stumble? And what might we need to change or give up in order to step into our better selves? As individuals, and as a church? What if we were more concerned about another's success than our own? What if John had offered that other guy a word of encouragement rather than criticise?

Maybe, just maybe, we would know ourselves to be building blocks rather than stumbling blocks. And through it Jesus is glorified.