

“Fierce Love”

Mark 9:38-50

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The movie *127 Hours*, which came out in 2010, tells the true story of a young man named Aron Ralston. Aron, who is played by James Franco in the film, is a canyoneer – a guy who likes to go climbing and spelunking and exploring. The film tells the true story of a grueling experience he had in 2003. Climbing alone in Canyonlands National Park in Utah, Ralston slips and falls, knocking loose a boulder that crushes his right hand and arm against the rock wall, wedging in place and trapping him. He soon realizes that he is completely alone – no one knows where he is, he has no way to communicate, no way to free himself, although he tries a number of methods from pure brute force to chipping away at the rock to trying to rig a pulley. Finally he comes to grips with what he will have to do if he wants to live. The title of the film – 127 hours – refers to the length of Ralston’s ordeal, from when he woke up in the morning to go hiking until he was under the care of medical personnel having amputated his own arm at the elbow with a dull pocket knife in order to escape.

The film is grueling to watch, excruciating – in fact, I only watched it because at the time I was attempting to watch every film nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture, although I’m glad I did – but it is a powerful and provocative exploration of human resilience and courage and ingenuity. And I thought of it today, as I reflected on our lectionary text for this week.

“If your hand causes you to stumble,” Jesus says, “cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell.”

These are stark and troubling words – perhaps, like me, you are somewhat alarmed by this side of Jesus. We Christians are often more comfortable with Jesus’s gentler and softer words: the shepherd looking for the lost sheep, for instance, or the story of the good Samaritan, or when he

says “let the little children come to me.” It is harder to face the stern words of Jesus, but all of it is part of who Jesus is, and all of those teachings are part of Jesus’s message for the disciples and for us.

But Jesus is not speaking to the disciples in a completely private setting. This passage continues a longer discourse which we’ve been hearing over the last few weeks, with Jesus teaching the disciples first as they walk along the road, and then inside a house. In the earlier part of the passage that we read last week, Jesus took a child into his arms and taught that anyone who welcomes such a child in his name welcomes him. The scene has not changed – the child is still in Jesus’s arms as he continues to teach. The child is listening as Jesus teaches – and that makes quite a bit of difference.

There they all are, with Jesus holding a child in his arms, as the disciples move on to the next subject: a stranger is using Jesus’ name to do ministry. And Jesus says, do not stop him. “Whoever is not against us is for us,” he says. But then he goes on to warn: “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones” – and perhaps he gestures to the little one in his lap – “who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.”

The disciples want Jesus to get angry that people are using his name without permission. Instead, he has a different focus: that whatever is done in his name must be for good, and not for harm. That whatever is done in his name must not harm the ones closest to his heart – the vulnerable, the little ones, the left behind, the lost. He doesn’t care so much about the credentials of the man casting out demons in his name. He cares about whether those who call themselves his followers are caring for the ones who need care.

Jesus surprises the disciples by commanding them to tolerate and accept the stranger doing ministry in his name – and that guidance is a reminder to us that the church of Christ is bigger than our tradition, or our theology. We can embrace that Christ’s name is used in ways that don’t entirely suit our preferred style. That we are bound by a common mission and purpose with Christ-followers whose worship and ministry is starkly different from ours. That is a tolerance Christ teaches the disciples. But there are limits to tolerance: Jesus refuses to excuse and accept and rationalize and minimize our capacity to harm. “If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it

off,” he says. The fact that the words are hyperbolic – no interpreter then or now believes Jesus was truly calling for self-amputation – should not dull their impact. There are things in ourselves that are harmful, to ourselves and to others, and Jesus makes no space for tolerating and excusing our propensity for harm. There is grace, surely, as we hear in so many places. There is the possibility of forgiveness. There is mercy and redemption. But there is also the stern order that we who follow Christ are to be fiercely honest in examining our own souls, and deeply committed to a holier way. Selfishness? Cut it off. Cowardice? Excise it. Callousness toward our neighbors? Gouge it out. A propensity for fudging the truth? It has to go. As committed as that climber, trapped alone in a canyon with a boulder crushing his arm.

It's a stark passage, and it can be troubling. But I think of people I know who have faced hard truths about cutting away what is harmful, so that they might have life. I think of people who have left dangerous and abusive relationships, and how the dynamic of abuse can make it as hard as cutting off a hand to walk away – the bravery it takes, and the new life that comes on the other side. Or I think of the people I know who have struggled with addiction and embraced sobriety. Twelve step programs often warn that in that journey, there will be times when the person thinks that they've come so far that surely now they can partake in moderation. But the teachings of those programs is that that simply isn't possible or safe for people in recovery – that total abstinence, total sobriety is the way. It can feel like cutting a part of oneself off – and it is life-saving, and life-giving, in the end. You may remember that about a month ago, I was away from church for my step-grandfather Tom's funeral, where I was given one of the sobriety tokens he received to mark his milestones in Alcoholics Anonymous. I brought it with me today – the one I have was for his 41-year milestone. He had his last drink before I was born, and I will always remember his quiet, persistent dedication to his sobriety, and to helping others who were facing what he had once faced.

Jesus' way is full of grace. It is a way of mercy and forgiveness. But the mercy is for the people of God, not for the harmful and hurtful acts and words and patterns and habits that make their way into our lives. It might feel harsh to hear Jesus speak in such violent imagery – drowning and amputations – not what we expect to hear in church.

But let's change our perspective for a moment. Because each of us – and that means you – are God's beloved child. You were once just the size of the little one on Jesus' knee, and you have

grown in body, mind, and spirit, but you are that same person, and just as beloved. So Jesus' words, stark as they sound, are not only about how rigorously we should search our own souls to purge away anything that might do harm. Jesus' words are also about God's fierce, protective love for you. If there are harms that you have suffered, in childhood or later – and who among us has not suffered harms, bigger or smaller? – then the words of Jesus are for you. That you are precious and worthy of protection. That God's love has no tolerance for harms perpetrated upon your body, your mind, or your spirit. That you deserve the shelter and safety of the fierce love of God, the same God whom the prophet Hosea described as like “a mother bear.”

We are commanded to be courageous, even ruthless, in being transformed, so that any part of ourselves that might do harm to self or neighbor is sought out and eliminated. But that same commandment is a reminder that God desires for us to be safe and cared for, to be nurtured and to thrive. What would the world be like if all of us who call ourselves Christians lived like our lives and our souls depended on leaving behind every part of ourselves that was harmful to ourselves and our neighbors? What would the world be like if every child were protected from harm, as Jesus commanded the disciples? It might be a world with less pain, and more joy. It might be a world with less fear, and more compassion. It would be a world, perhaps, where Good Samaritans were not so rare, where shepherds went looking for the lost sheep, where the hungry were filled with good things and the lowly were lifted up. It would be the Reign of God.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.