



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

SEPTEMBER 30, 2012
THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Maimed . . . for Life
James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

It was one of those good ideas gone bad. It was a perfect day that turned awful. It was a dream come true that became anyone's worst nightmare.

In 2003, twenty-seven year old Aron Ralston was by all accounts, "a climbing junkie." On April 26 he left work for several days of biking, hiking, and climbing in Blue John Canyon in Utah. He drove several hours to his camping spot, jumped on his mountain bike, rode several miles, then began hiking toward a hidden slot canyon he had read about. Along the way he met up with two young women who were also climbing. They explored a canyon or two together, took a dip in a refreshing spring, and then parted ways as he continued on his expedition. It was a gorgeous day and his adrenaline was high. He climbed, leaped, and scampered up ancient rock walls, through towering canyons, and over spine tingling crevices.

He finally reached the slot canyon he wanted to explore. He began his descent, carefully choosing footholds and hand grips. As he reached over a hanging boulder for support, it shifted and fell down the crevice, pulling him along with it. As the passageway narrowed, the boulder became stuck and, along with it, Aron Ralston's hand which was crushed by the weight and force of the 800 pound stone.

A seasoned climber, Aron did not panic but began trying to dislodge the rock. He could not get a secure enough footing to push the rock up, nor was he strong enough to lift 800 pounds with one arm. He tried digging to free his hand but he had no tools to break up the rock. Then another problem came to mind: no one knew where he was. Although he typically informed family or friends of his whereabouts, he had not done so this time. He was off work for several days, so no one would be missing him. Furthermore, he was now 120 feet below the surface of the desert in a hidden canyon. It had become a dark day indeed.

For over five days Aron fought against dehydration, hypothermia, and fear. Fully expecting to die in the canyon, he videotaped himself everyday to

leave a record and explain what had happened. He carved his name and the date in the rock so his body could be identified. Finally, he knew that the only hope he had of living was to sever his arm to get free. All he had was a utility tool with a dull blade, but it was enough to do the job. Once free, he still had to rappel 65 feet down into the canyon and hike eight miles to his car. Fortunately, he soon came across a family who aided him and helped get him rescued. Some of you have seen the movie *127 Hours* which portrays his harrowing story.

I think we all would agree that this young man's action was drastic, but what else could he do? What would you do in a similar situation?

To fully understand what Jesus had in mind when he said, "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off," we have to turn to someone like Aron Ralston. Although Aron's situation was not the result of sin, the fact that his trapped hand was going to cost him his life fits the intent of Jesus' teaching. Aron's hand had gotten him into a dangerous situation. That hand was the only thing keeping him from freedom. That hand was about to cause him to lose his life. He had no choice but to lose his hand if he was going to survive. He did survive and today is alive and healthy and happy. He has a family and still climbs—but safely and wisely.

There is no denying that Jesus' words are, at best, difficult to hear. Did Jesus really expect people to cut off hands and feet and pluck out eyes when they had sinned? Would he be in favor of Sharia law as practiced in some parts of the Arab world where a man caught stealing would lose his hand? Was he in favor of the ancient practice of his forefathers of satisfying a transgression with "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth"?

Obviously not. We remember another of those difficult sayings of Jesus when he taught, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (Matthew 5:38-39). We also remember that when challenged to invoke the judgement of stoning on a woman caught in adultery, Jesus challenged her accusers to consider their own sin when handing out punishment to others. He also cautioned the woman not to forget this experience of grace and to "go and sin no more" (John 8:11).

Jesus often used hyperbole to make a point. Jim Taylor says, "Jesus is indulging in wild exaggeration. If we took his instructions literally, we'd all be hobbling around on one leg, squinting with one eye, and shaking hands

left-handed.”¹ He is trying to get our attention. This form of saying is known as the “better than proverbs”²:

“One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one whose temper is controlled than one who captures a city” (Proverbs 16:32).

“A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold” (Proverbs 22:1).

The attributes of Wisdom are described in this manner: “Her income is better than silver, and her revenue better than gold” (Proverbs 3:14), “My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold, and my yield than choice silver” (Proverbs 8:19).

Jesus was trying to make a point, but we have to be careful that we don’t lose the point. Giving his listeners two clear and distinct options, one with grave consequences and the other with beneficial results, Jesus forced them to decide between the two. Would they rather lose a hand, a foot, or an eye and live or retain all their body parts and forever suffer for the sins they had committed? The choice was obvious. Or was it?

Jim Taylor reminds us that what Jesus is talking about, “is not really about body parts. I think it’s more about breaking bad habits,” he says. “When you realize that smoking or drinking, sugar or caffeine, are not good for you, how do you quit? (How do we men stop thinking of ourselves as God’s gift to women?) What kind of self-discipline does quitting demand? Where do you get the strength to swim against the cultural stream, to be different, to resist social pressures?”³

Jesus was talking about making drastic changes in lifestyle and in heart. You can believe he caught the attention of his followers. I suspect he has caught our attention as well, especially if you are willing to imagine yourself in a situation like Aron Ralston found himself. Could you, would you, cut off your arm to save your life? I think I might be willing to have it done if a good surgeon and anesthesiologist were nearby. But if I had to do it myself with only a dull knife . . . I am not sure. The question is what will you do, to what

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lengths will you go to save your life? Jesus is putting the question to everyone of us in a way that we can understand. I am probably not ever going to put myself in a situation in which I may have a boulder pinning me to a canyon wall miles from any source of help. I am going to find myself trapped by sin, however. I know what that kind of desperation is like . . . and so do you.

So, Jesus asks, what are you going to do about it? Are you willing to do what is necessary to save your life from destructive habits and actions? Are you willing to cut out those cancerous attitudes and activities that will eventually sap you of real life and leave you empty and dead inside? He warns what the consequences of our sins will be when our influence on other people is considered: "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones 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." Apparently the mafia was not the first group to come up with the idea of "sleeping with the fishes wearing cement shoes!"

Jesus did not want his listeners to begin mutilating themselves, but he did fully expect them to cut out those attitudes and actions which were destructive to themselves and others. He expects no less of us.

The writer of James got in on this subject, too, but in a little different way. He reminds us that there is a reciprocal responsibility in the faith community. We are supposed to look out for one another as well as for ourselves. It is our responsibility as brothers and sisters in the faith to help keep one another on the right path. Matthew tells us that Jesus spoke of this responsibility just after he offered the teaching we are considering today. He said, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one" (Matthew 18:15).

Think how many lives we could save with a simple word of encouragement and counsel. Imagine the heartache and shared pain that could be avoided if we intervened in a friend's life and offered a means of "escape" without having to do emergency surgery later on.

I remember a friend telling me of an experience he had when he was a child. He and his parents had been visiting with some of their friends. When Frank and his parents left, he had a little something extra in his pocket. His parents discovered a penny that he had taken from a little dish that was on the coffee table in their friends' home. They promptly got back in their car and

drove back to their friends' house. When they arrived and knocked on the door, they told Frank to explain why they had returned. With hanging head and trembling hand, the little boy held out the penny and explained that he had taken it. He apologized and asked for their forgiveness. As most of us would do, the adults immediately dismissed the act as the curiosity of a little boy. No harm. No foul. Frank's parents hushed their friends, however, and insisted that he had taken something that was not his, no matter how insignificant it was to the friends. He had done wrong and they needed to accept his apology without dismissing it so that he would learn why what he did was wrong.

You and I might think that Frank's parents went a bit overboard by making a big deal out of a little penny, but Frank did not. When he first told me that story, at least twenty years after it had happened, he expressed gratitude for what his parents had done and how they had handled it. It was a lesson he never forgot and I suspect he has told it to his two sons many times over.

I do not think for a minute that had Frank's parents not insisted he return that penny that night that he would have turned to a life of stealing and crime. He was fortunate to be raised in a way that would deter such ambitions. Still, you never know. What I do know is that a thief has to steal for the first time. A liar has to tell the first lie. A cheater has to fudge the first instance. And the first inclination toward hatred has to be given an opportunity to take root. Jesus said that we are "the salt of the earth" (Matthew 5:13). That means that we are supposed to help flavor and preserve the world, not to cause it to spoil.

Sometimes what seems to be a really good idea turns out to be a lousy idea. Sometimes what begins feeling like a perfect day turns into an awful day. Sometimes what seems like a dream come true becomes our worst nightmare. Sometimes what we think will make our life better turns out to destroy our life as we know it. Sin would not be a problem if it were not so appealing. It would not be a problem if it were not so destructive.

What would you do to save your life? How far would you go to preserve what is dearest to you? Is life without some harmful habit or destructive attitude not better than losing life itself? Think of Aron Ralston. Think of Jesus. Better yet, think of yourself and the people you love. Are you willing to be maimed so that you can live? Or is it better to change now and enjoy life in all of its intended fullness? What will you do?

September 30, 2012

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

As summer's heat retreats to autumn's coolness and the bold colors of spring flowers blush to softer hues of orange, red, and yellow, we still know that you are Lord of all nature, O God. Beautiful and wonderful though your creation is, it cannot match the wonder and awe with which we worship Jesus the Christ who has lived among us and now reigns with you in the glory that is eternal life. All that we need for life has come from your generous hands, O God, and all that we need for everlasting life has come through the grace of Christ. With hearts overflowing, we offer our thanksgiving and sing our praise.

We thank you for the many ways we encountered you this week past. As we think back, we remember encouraging conversations, moonlit nights, warm smiles, quiet assurances, and clear miracles of life that spoke your name to us. We thank you for every prayer that was answered and for responses that we did not request but which surely came from your abundant love.

It seems as if all we do is ask for favors and then ask for more help, O God. It is not that we are selfish or greedy; rather, it is that we care about other people and ourselves. We see so much illness, such discord in life, too much hatred in the world, and not enough kindness expressed. We worry about family and friends. We pray for people we do not even know because their needs are just as important as ours. And we pray for ourselves because we know that you care and there is nowhere else for us to turn.

So listen again to the soundings of our hearts, we pray. Visit those who are ill. Touch all who are worried and anxious. Hover over each one who is broken with grief. Sit beside each one who struggles with problems that are far bigger than themselves, and hold each one who is ready to give up and give in. Whisper in our hearts of your nearness and assure us that we are not alone.

We have already confessed our sin, but you know that we did not have time to mention it all. Attend to what has not yet been spoken, O God, dawn upon our souls, and grant us the strength and courage to give up those things, too. Wake our spirits and clear our sight that we might see you who created all that is and who breathed holy life into us as well. Amen.



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