

## **Saint Barnabas Church**

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## **Cutting away our Resentments**

If I am to ask you to identify their favorite Bible passage, I'm guessing it's very likely not one of you will mention the verses we just heard from the ninth chapter of Mark's Gospel:

*"If your hand 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 foot 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, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched."*

What are we to do with these words from Jesus? We assume that he's not talking about literal amputation: plucking out eyes, cutting off hands and feet. We recognize that the language of the Bible is sometimes so vivid and concrete that it perplexes us. We think we know what Jesus is not recommending, but that by itself leaves us nowhere. In the course of these strange verses, what is it that Jesus calls on us to do?

Take a minute, please, and search the recesses of your mind, and see if you can recall a place of resentment. A resentment that is old and ugly, but still very much alive.

A time and place where you feel hostility toward someone; a someone who did something to hurt you. A word was spoken, an action was done, or maybe something should have happened that never did. Or there's a hostility you feel toward someone just because of who that person is. These are ways in which a resentment begins to grow. A resentment can thrive in darkness or in light. It almost doesn't matter if you are aware of your resentment or unaware. Still it grows, and its roots run deep.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book Life Together, stated

The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is vital between us. We have one another only through Christ, but through Christ we do have one another, wholly, and for all eternity...

When God was merciful to us, we learned to be merciful with our brethren.

When we received forgiveness instead of judgment, we too, were made ready to forgive our brethren.

What God did to us, we then owed to others.

The more we received, the more we were able to give; and the more meager our brotherly love, the less were we living by God's mercy and love.

Thus God himself taught us to meet one another as God has met us in Christ.

As a country we saw resentment alive and active in our own Senate Judiciary Committee hearing this week. There was great palpable pain and resentment in that room on Friday.

When a resentment is alive in us, it drains away energy, takes away life, makes us exist on a different, lower level. Like a tumor, it puts pressure on the healthy tissue. A resentment crowds out what really belongs to us.

Perhaps this is what Jesus is talking about when he gets on a roll about amputation. When he tells us to pluck out eyes, to cut off hands and feet that cause us to stumble, maybe what he means is that our resentments need to be removed, and that removing them can seem terribly hard, even impossible.

A resentment can seem part of who we are so that its disappearance amounts to a real loss, an amputation. A resentment can contribute to our identity, and its removal call that identity into question. While we still cling to our resentment,

regard it as essential, the prospect of losing it can appear as unnatural and unattractive as the maiming of our body.

Yet Jesus tells us that this maiming is necessary if we are to enter life. There's no way we can bring our resentments along with us into God's kingdom. The divine realm consists entirely of amputees whose resentments have been removed.

Whatever our justification, whether fantasy or brutal fact, somehow we must give up this resentment, and giving it up will seem at the time the most unnatural, self-destructive act in the world. What we're talking about here is forgiveness, and whenever forgiveness occurs, it's a miracle as much as walking on water or restoring sight to the blind.

Yet there can be motives behind our choice to give up resentment, to gouge it out from the substance of our lives.

One motive results from a consideration of what resentment does to us. WE know and have seen highly resentful people. I experience it as sad, upsetting, depressing. What's worse is to be that person oneself, to never escape the company of someone who's resentful. When we consent to the removal of resentments, we're like the patient who submits to life-threatening surgery because there is no hope for life without it.

Another motive appears when we recognize that we are forgiven people, forgiven by God at the price of Christ's cross, and we look at our resentments in the light of that. If God forgives me, then how can I not forgive my neighbor?

Indeed, how can I be capable of forgiveness unless I extend forgiveness? As the Lord's Prayer states: forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

And if God, whose eyes are too pure to look on evil, can forgive my infinite debt, what prevents me, who am but dust and ashes, from extending forgiveness to my fellow servant who stands in need?

Yet giving up resentments can seem as difficult as accepting amputation! Our hearts harden easily. They become hard over and over again.

Perhaps we do not want to relinquish our resentment. For the moment we may need to settle for wanting to want to relinquish it. Or at bottom there may be only the plaintive cry, "Lord, soften my heart!" From meager beginnings better things can come.

Sometimes we consider what God asks of us and end up in a quandary. For the good things we offer God are in fact God's gifts to us. As one scripture sentence puts it: All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee. When a strict accounting is made, the only things we have to offer god that belong completely to us are gifts no one would want: such things as our resentments.

But God gladly accepts these offerings to set us free from them, and we must give these sordid gifts first if our return of the good things God gives us is to have significance.

Perhaps you have seen in a medical office or hospital room a special waste container labeled BIOHAZARD. Into this container are put items that present a health threat to anyone who comes into contact with them. Given the possibilities for infection, the BIOHAZARD container is a sensible precaution.

Now I invite you to imagine a BIOHAZARD container of a different kind. Into this container goes anything that represents a threat to the health of our soul, anything that can cause our hearts to harden in the spiritual sense. This container is an ideal receptacle for resentments.

Do you have a resentment that it is time for you to cut out of your life and discard? Doing this will not be easy, but it's possible. I invite you into a the period of silence to imagine the resentment that may reside inside you. Tear the resentment from its place and toss it into the BIOHAZARD container intended for dangerous spiritual waste. Offer up the container, and whole heartedly receive the blessing that follows our confession.

To offer up this resentment, to confess it to God is an odd offering, I grant you, but God will accept it. I PRAY you will find that where your resentment was cut

away will not remain a gaping wound, but will become the site of renewed health and unexpected vitality.

May God bless in in this time of silent reflection.