

This gospel today has such extreme language that of course we have to conclude that we can't really take it literally. As one preacher pointed out about this reading, it's not like any of us have ever seen a congregation with even a few one-eyed or one-handed Christians who clearly took Jesus's guidance about how to deal with their sinful tendencies. And as far the idea about people who discourage people from following Jesus being better off drowned, well, I can think of several such people who drive people away from the church, and as far as I know they have not tied their neck to a rock and find themselves at the bottom of Mobile Bay.

This seems to be a **Jesus** that we see (now and then) in the gospel when clearly he is **at his wit's end trying to get people to understand a simple point:**

Don't let anything stand in the way of being close to God and the kingdom of God. *Anything.*

The **word that is repeated** over and over again in this passage, although it's not clear from this translation, the word that Jesus keeps repeating is **obstacle**. If you have an obstacle, something that is in your way, get rid of it, no matter what it is. And don't just get rid of your own obstacles, don't place obstacles in the way of others. **Jesus wants us to realize that for us this is a matter of life and death.**
Better to enter the Kingdom of God maimed than cast into the fire of Gehenna "Whole".

We're at the turning point in this gospel of Mark, when the mission and ministry is **turning towards Jerusalem and the cross, and the disciples are suddenly erecting obstacles to building the kingdom** the way Jesus envisions it.

First, it was their ego and their ambition, where seemingly ten minutes after seeing Christ transfigured on the mountaintop they are arguing about who is the greatest.

Now this week, they're upset because someone who does not have the proper status or identity is healing people using Jesus's name. God is bigger than you and me and our own narrow view of who is in or out!

And of course above all they're resistant to this whole idea of Jesus's death, his willingness to go towards Jerusalem and the story of our Salvation. That change they don't want. And so to this part of the Gospel story, that they will have to suffer and die, they will have to embrace the cross, they put up the greatest obstacle of all.

There are plenty of things that are our obstacles, not just ego and ambition and our desire to feel more successful than others, but really anything that keeps us away from God, our discouragement, our distractions, our cynicism and our anger, or our sense that we are not the sort of person God is even trying to reach!

All those beliefs and habits are hard to get rid of; the image of cutting off a hand gets the point across of just how hard it is to take a step away from what is keeping us from a relationship with God.

It sounds awful, this idea of cutting away at ourselves, but hard as it is to begin, in the end it is actually a process more like finally putting down a heavy load, or taking blinders off, getting rid of what seemed like part of ourselves, but the thing we needed to cut away is actually a burden that is keeping us from real joy and real freedom.

Only you know what kind of distractions or sadness or attachments or resistance are your obstacles keeping you from the banquet, or maybe it's just a feeling that all this talk about what is being offered us is too good or too unrealistic or too vague.

Whatever our obstacle is to being part of the kingdom, let's ask God for the courage to perform some surgery that will take it away, and bring us closer.