

Sermon preached by Andy Russell
Sunday, September 30, 2018 | [Proper 21, Year B](#)
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

“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. If your hand causes you to stumble, 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.”

I'm telling you, these clergy people are out to get me. It's the only explanation. My first time preaching, and these are Jesus' words. I mean seriously, did I forgot to say hi to Gary as we passed in the hall one day? I mean, this is a difficult passage. The same Jesus that talks about loving your enemy and seeking out the lost sheep is talking about drowning and maiming.

This is a difficult passage. But I've realized that I've seen this passage lived out, in real life. This story is not my own, but rather the story of someone I'll call Ms. Peterson.

Last year I lived in Atlanta, interning at an organization that served homeless folks. The case management team with which I worked was responsible for helping individuals experiencing homelessness find housing, a source of income, and any other resources necessary for stabilizing their lives. All of the clients we served also lived with a severe mental illness, especially bipolar or schizophrenia.

One day, one of our outreach staff introduced me to a new client that I would begin working with. She was 52 years old and diagnosed with bipolar. Ms. Peterson grew up in a low income neighborhood in the city and was involved with substance abuse early in her life. It's not

hyperbole to say it was all she ever knew. Her friends were drug abusers. She spent most of her time with them, stayed in their homes and using hard drugs with them. That was simply her way of life. It was far from a pleasant lifestyle—she had a serious addiction with no income to supply it, she was functionally homeless as she stayed the night with anyone she could, and her mental condition was at that point undiagnosed and untreated, resulting in severe swings of mania and depression. In the language of this gospel passage, it sounded like a lot of stumbling. One day, she got into a violent fight with her significant other. His angry assaults made Ms. Peterson fear for her life. She fought back. Ms. Peterson killed him. She still bore the marks of that altercation: her head was shaved, revealing a large mark on her head where her boyfriend had struck her. Ms. Peterson went to prison for manslaughter. When I met her, she was several years removed from prison.

While incarcerated, Ms. Peterson had had a reckoning with herself. The things in her life that caused her to stumble, she cut them off. She chose to cut out the self-harming patterns of behavior, relationships, and materials in her life. Those things ceased to be a part of who she was. Life giving habits replaced stumbling blocks. Ms. Peterson received both therapy and medication for bipolar. She attended two substance abuse classes each week. Later on, she secured disability income and, as little as her income was, managed to find a place to stay, surrounded by people who cared for her and were careful not to put stumbling blocks in her way. Ms. Peterson has found new life—she cut off the things that caused her to stumble. You could tell she was extremely proud of the strides she had made, as she should be.

And yet, the language of “cutting off” is so blunt, visceral, even gruesome. Usually when we use such words, it’s tied to something sad or traumatic—someone being cut out of the family or a friend group or

being cut from the team. It sounds like disconnect and alienation. But here, I don't think Jesus is urging us to be disconnected or to inflict some sort of harsh trauma on ourselves or others. Instead, through cutting off, we actually are able to move towards greater unity and love with ourselves, others, and God. It's important to understand cutting off as an act of love, of self-love, rather than of punishment.

In *Where God Happens*, Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, recounts the teachings and wisdom of the desert mothers and fathers of the third and fourth centuries. These individuals, eager to practice Christianity steeped in prayer and asceticism, ventured out into the desert of Egypt and established monastic communities there. Rowan Williams recounts one story written about Abba Poemen, one of the most famous of the desert fathers. Williams writes:

“Abba Poemen is confronted with a brother who admits to having committed a great sin and wants to do three years’ penance. ‘The old man said, “That’s a lot.” The brother said, “What about one year?” The old man said, “That’s still quite a lot.” Some other people suggested forty days; Poemen said, “That’s a lot too.” And he said, “What I think is that if someone repents with all one’s heart and intends never to commit the sin again, perhaps God will be satisfied with only three days.”

There is a lot to unpack in this story, but two things especially speak to me in light of this gospel passage. The first is the brother’s, and I think also often our, eagerness to be harsh towards ourselves. I have certainly felt this way before. At William & Mary, I struggled with the expectations of being the perfect college student, taking advantage of what I was told would be the best four years of my life. Being all of those things expected of me just wasn’t me, but I thought it should be me, that there was something wrong with me if I didn’t want or didn’t

strive to be all of those things. There were times where I was not nice to myself about it.

This harshness exists in so many different contexts in our lives. When we fall short of corporate expectations of how we should be, we beat ourselves up. When we struggle in school, labeling other kids as the smart, or athletic, or popular ones, we long to be someone else. When our bodies fall short of what we see on Instagram or on TV shows, we despair. Or maybe even worse, we meet these expectations and live in constant fear of the day when we no longer measure up to the standard. Sometimes we even condemn others for not meeting these societal expectations, too. I'm not trying to be bleak, I'm trying to acknowledge that for many people this struggle is real. We can be so harsh to ourselves and one another.

The second thing that strikes me is that Abba Poemen talks the brother down from three years of penance, an extraordinarily harsh sentence, to three days of penance. We can do that for one another. We can recognize the tension that yes, maybe someone has not loved their neighbor as themselves, but also, they are a beloved child of God and should be treated as such. We should hold each other accountable, but always from a place of care, not judgment. We are in community, in this church and elsewhere. James calls us to pray for the suffering and the sick. James also calls us to sing songs of praise when we're joyful. We have the power, maybe even the responsibility, to be agents of God, to be gentle and compassionate towards our brothers and sisters. To show them love.

And that's the crux of it, right? Jesus calls us to cut off, not out of harshness or condemnation, but out of love. Jesus calls us to cut off the things in our lives that cause us to stumble, things that stop us from loving ourselves, from loving each other, from loving God. Jesus wants

what's best for us! He says it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God missing something nonessential than to be absent from God for your life, or worse, for all eternity. If coveting your neighbor's perceived perfect life is causing you to stumble, cut it out of your life. If anxiety about being a part of the right social group is causing you to stumble, cut it out of your life. If the pursuit of perfection fills you with self-loathing, cut it out of your life.

To be sure, cutting off is no easy thing. Often times our most serious stumbling blocks feel a part of us, as if they were our hands, or feet, or eyes. We have a hard time imagining life without them. But Jesus reassures us that there is, in fact, life without those things we thought were essential. You can live without those things. Life will be fuller without those things.

Humans stumble—it's what we do. But Jesus reminds us that when you stumble, that doesn't make you any less beloved in the eyes of God. God forever calls us to be with Godself. That call is eternal. So if someone, like Ms. Peterson, has a reckoning, a moment of clarity, God is perpetually there, with open arms. And there are people out there with open arms too. People who care about you. Ms. Peterson did not clear the stumbling blocks alone—she had the support of social workers, peers, and friends. We don't need to clear our stumbling blocks alone either. Find your Abba Poemens, the gentle witnesses to the spark of the divine already inside you.

My sisters and brothers, let's cut off, let's clear the stumbling blocks. Doing so is an act of love, an act of liberation, which draws ourselves closer to God and God's kingdom. Amen.