

Oct, 14, '18 Anthon UMC, Mark 10:17-31, "Paper Cuts"
By Pastor Sheryl Ashley

Anybody here get a good paper-cut lately? The worst ones I ever get are when I have been quickly licking envelopes to send out group mailings. God bless the person who invented the rip off pre-glued envelopes. I just hate those cuts that come unexpectedly out of nowhere while handling paper with the very best of intentions. Such cuts ooze blood, and they sting like being cut to the bone. Very attention getting!

So it is meant to be, in a good attention getting way, when we are cut to the quick by hearing the Word of God. Sometimes very unexpectedly and deeply it lays our soul bare to the bone before God. In our first reading from Hebrews today it talks about the cutting power of the word like being pierced with a double edged sword. I think of the Bible filled with pages of paper, capable of cutting away the rebelliousness in us, until we are reshaped spiritually in ways we need to change.

Cutting something changes its shape and form, and the Word of God is compared to such cutting away the evil in life, like cutting with a lethal double edged sword. One of the reasons why the Greek and Roman Empires established themselves in such a powerful way was these amazing cutting edge weapons of war. The advantage of the double-edge, of course, is that no matter which way you strike on the battle field, you

don't have to take another swing or turn around the blade to keep fighting. The double-edged sword of the Word allows for a swifter and more effective attack to defeat the enemy of false beliefs that attack the Christian.

But no matter what form it is in, according to the author of our first reading in the book of Hebrews, the Word of God is living and active. It is not simply history; it is not a museum of old ideas and insights that have seen their day. Because the Bible is the inspired Word of God, it is authoritative in matters of faith and morals. It is forever sharp and it is the guide for today's problems! And sometimes that means holding it in our hands where it will not easily be forgotten, like those visually obvious Christians who actually carry their Bibles to church and read them daily in their homes so their children can see that God's word is the sword of the spirit stronger than worldly force.

The truth of the sword, or of this paper cutting message, is that the gospel, while it is the good news of God's grace and salvation, also makes some hard demands on us besides carrying it around in physical form. We are fighting a war against attacks of our very souls and God wants us to be in shape to do it successfully. To do this we need cut through the falseness of life with our sword of the word and we need to let it cut away

the negative thoughts and intentions of our own hearts. The cost of following Christ is getting rid of what holds us back from committing to Him totally.

Truthfully, there are things we all struggle with. Each of us is struggling perhaps with different aspects of the cost of discipleship, so each of us feels the sharpness of the Word in different ways – that two edged sword that slices the evil from the good –as we run toward Christ, seeking His gift of eternal life like the rich man. It makes cutting demands of us like forgiving those who hurt us. Holding onto anger wounds us internally and leaves cuts on our souls that scar us forever. Who can afford that? And how about holding back our gifts and talents and worldly goods from the church or those in need, hoarding our time for our own pleasures and our money for our own material excesses. We have a great opportunity to give today to the people of the Florida disaster and to defeat hunger near and far in supporting CROP Walk

Jesus deals with these costs in our second reading from the Gospel of Mark today. Here we have a man running, a man of financial means – running eagerly, mind you – surely one who wants the word of God to tell him the way of eternal life, the one thing he cannot purchase with all his golden coins. And Jesus gives him this list of the commandments: “No

murder, no adultery, no stealing, no false witnessing, no defrauding and honoring your father and mother. “ In the man’s mind there is no conflict here. These are no cutting words to him. He responds reassured, “Well I have been obedient to these all my life! I’m good to go!” -- Well aren’t we all?!?

Ah but his personal paper cut is coming. The sword of the word swings backs and gets him where he least expects it. He is slashed in the pocket book. Isn’t that the ouchiest place of all?

I am reminded of the story of the devil out to get a Christian one day. When he saw the Christian he shot one of his fiery darts and it struck the Christian in the chest. The Christian had on the breastplate of righteousness so he wasn’t harmed. The devil shot at the Christian’s head but that was protected by the helmet of salvation. The devil figured everyone has an Achilles’ heel so he shot at the Christian’s feet that were shod with the gospel of peace so no harm was done. The Christian smirked and turned around to walk away. The devil fired an arrow into the Christian’s wallet - and killed him.

The Achilles’ heel of many of us is really in our billfolds. And so if Jesus’ words cut to the quick this man of Jesus’ time, a man sure he was

safe on all counts back then, where and when would Jesus use the Word to carve the truth into us today?

Let me run this one past you to see how you would react. A seminary professor named Stanley Hauerwas has a novel idea about how church should receive new members. A teacher of Christian ethics at Duke University, he has written about the church's need for honesty and has challenged us to tell the truth as a "community of believers who seek the way to eternal life."

To this end the professor has a modest proposal. Whenever people join the church, Hauerwas thinks they should stand and answer four questions. Let's try it!

"Who is your Lord and Savior" The obvious response:"Jesus Christ."

"Do you trust in him and seek to be his disciple of course is:" "I do."

"Will you be a faithful member of this congregation? The immediate answer: "I will."

"Finally, one last question:" "What is your annual income?"

You heard me correctly. When people join the church, Dr Hauerwas thinks they ought to name their Lord and Savior and tell fellow church members how much money they make.

It is obvious Hauerwas does not serve as a pastor of a congregation. His idea just wouldn't work, especially in the American church. Most church members believe salary figures are more sacred than prayer, and would quickly tell an inquisitive minister to snoop around somewhere else. What's more, parish experience tempers the questions a minister asks of church members. Most pastors quickly learn how to dance around the issue of money without ever naming it. None of us wants to get cut by revealing our cash flow because then more might be expected of us. Although the church I grew up in published the amount the members gave, both to local use and missions! You can correctly assume that was not a United Methodist Church.

There is an assumption that religion is "free." No so. The Christian faith is a costly faith. It demands a radical commitment to Jesus Christ and to His church. The word says that those who would follow Jesus must pick up their crosses and give their lives as he has given his life for us. Anything less would be cheapened grace.

The question of the day is: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Obviously that's the kind of question Jesus has been wanting to hear. For several chapters of the word recorded in Mark, Jesus has been surrounded by disciples who chase away children, quiver in disbelief, and argue over

which of them is the greatest. Finally, here's an honest seeker who wants to know what it takes. What must he do? And then he finds out that keeping all those commandments is not enough...an unexpected cut to him, recorded in the paper of this book.

The sad news is that when Jesus invited him to follow as a disciple, the man turned and walked away. And listen to Jesus' words, "You lack something." What was he talking about? The man had money. Mark doesn't say how much, but we can assume he had a lot of things that others enjoy. You can bet he had a nice house with a sturdy roof over his head. He had somebody to dust the furniture and someone to landscape whatever he had for a lawn. He put food on the table every night, and nobody in his home ever wanted for anything. He could afford attractive clothes for his family. He kept his mortgage paid up. Heck, he probably held the mortgages of other people's property. His credit was good anywhere and he paid his bills on time. He had everything money could buy. But the one thing he lacked, was freedom from his possessions. He couldn't keep the first Commandment of "No other gods before me."

All of a sudden the man of means hits the wall and he just can't cut through to the other side where he really wants to be...with Jesus. And the Gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus loves this man. Not only is this the only

occasion where Mark says Jesus loved somebody. This is the only time in Mark's gospel when Jesus invited someone to follow him and the person could not do it. The cutting response of the refusal is given: "He went away grieving, for he had many possessions." These possessions were his first love.

Jesus words did not command the man to become destitute, nor to take on the burden of voluntary poverty. Neither did he compel him to empty his pockets. Rather he summoned the man to cut all ties to the things of the world which enslave and entangle. For this man, that one thing was putting his possessions over following Jesus. They owned him and he chose to give them first allegiance.

The eternity this man sought was already paid by Jesus, Jesus, who loved the man with the passion only God possesses, Jesus, was about to take the cruelest cut of all, being pierced on the cross, and a double edged sword would enter his side to prove his death. Jesus took that cut personally for each of us.

Henri Barbusse once wrote a novel, entitled The Flower, about two soldiers. One of the soldiers is a man of sterling character. His friend however, whose name is Dominique has made many mistakes in his life.

In one passage the soldier with the unblemished record has been wounded and is dying . he turns to Dominique and says: "It can't be long now. Listen, Dominique. You've lived a bad life. There are many convictions against your name. But there are no convictions against my name. Take my name. Take it. I give it to you. Straight off, you've no more convictions. Take my name, and give me yours so that I can carry all your past mistakes away with me.

That soldier truly cared about his friend. They would exchange names and he would be forever his friend's misdoings. What if we had a friend like that—one who would take all our past mistakes upon himself? The Scripture say this is indeed what Christ has done for us—given us his good name, as it were., and taken our name which is stained by sin. Isaiah wrote "Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering...he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed."

The truth is that the word of God can cut you. It needs to cut us, but the blood that flows from that cut is Christ's. It is cutting news that there is no other way for us to enter into eternal life than to hear and believe that Jesus has paid the price for us. Our response, the word says, is to live for Jesus in all ways. It's "cutting edge" to live for Jesus, and that is impossible

without his powerful word within you. For then, all things are possible with God. Thanks to our great high priest, Jesus, we can approach God's throne of grace with confidence washed clean by the Word made Flesh, Jesus Christ. And that is the good news about paper cuts for today!