

When One is Better Than Two

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Mark 9: 38-50

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John said to [Jesus], "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." 39 But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. 40 Whoever is not against us is for us. 41 For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. 42 "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. 43 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. 44 [omitted in best ancient authorities] 45 And if your foot 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. 46 [omitted in best ancient authorities] 47 And if your eye 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, 48 where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. 49 "For everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."



I received a revelation last summer.

I was swimming with my daughter in the lake at the campground on the Jersey Shore where I spent a week ending with Labor Day with her and other friends and family members. My sister and her grandson were with us for a day. As we swam in the same lake where my mother and father took us when we were younger, I said to my sister, "Hey, Pat. Know what I just realized about Dad?"

"That you look just like him as you swim out there with Lacey??" she replied only partly joking. I suppose she had a revelation as well – the graying hair, pale translucent-white belly, and hairy back reminded her that a little boy will often grow up to be just like his dad even if he tries not to. But that wasn't my revelation.

My dad, some of you know already, had only one leg. I've said here before that his left leg had been amputated below the knee in 1943 after his sea plane crashed in the South Pacific during WWII. So having a dad with one leg was very natural to me. My dad could and would do most anything that anybody else's dad did – he rode a bike, he ice skated and roller skated, he played volleyball, he led Boy Scout hikes and played softball with us, he occasionally square-danced with my mom, and he told stories like no one else ever could.

My dad also loved to swim. And so I got very used to being with him at a pool or at the beach or at the campground lake where he would walk to the lifeguard stand wearing his wooden leg, remove it there, lean it against the stand, and then hop to the water's edge. It was an everyday event when we were at the shore. No hassle, no fuss, no embarrassment – he just did it.

But what I suddenly realized this summer – and what I revealed to my sister – is that when you have one leg and are hopping on that one leg toward the water, there's no turning back once you feel the water temperature. Think about it for a moment. You and I have an opportunity to wade in slowly – "Oh that's cold! Just one more step. Oops ... cold, cold, cold ..." The water eventually touches the edge of your bathing suit – "I'll just ease in a little bit at a time" – then to your waist, your chest.

The revelation: When you have one leg, there's no easing in. You hop, you plant that one foot, and you dive.

In you go, head first – or *foot* first, if you will. Maybe it's not such a shocking revelation, but I realized that my father boldly splashed into the water no matter the temperature. One leg gives you fewer choices, but more resilience.

Mark has Jesus offering a peculiar little message about being one handed – or one footed. And in some way I think it has to do with that same revelation I received. One leg – you're off balance and you are going to have to dive right into the situation before you.

Jesus says that if your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off because there are just some things in life that you can do better with just one foot or hand. Please don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that my dad's sin called for him to remove his left leg or that any loss of a limb or member or any disability for that matter is related to one's sinfulness. But what Jesus does say to me in this metaphor is that to live the life to which God calls us you sometimes need only one hand, one foot, one eye. Not physically, but metaphorically.

To dive into the water, maybe it *is* better to physically have only one foot. No hesitation. No resistance. You get into the place you wanted to go without a second thought. Dad certainly dove into his life in the same way he dove into the ocean. No holds barred. Hop, plant, dive. I can only hope that I can use that same attitude in living my life for God's purposes. I know I don't hit the water like he did. I'm more of a “ew, ew, ew, cold, cold, cold” one toe at a time guy when it comes to the edge of the water. I pray that God will let me do differently in my life's dives.

So here's where we are. I am inviting you today to an opportunity where you need to dive in head first, no matter the climate, no matter the consequences, no matter the splash you cause – no matter what. You need to hop on down to the edge, off balance and wobbly, lean forward and hit the water like never before. We are at the edge of a place where having only one hand or one foot is better than two, a place where God asks us to

confidently commit to the head-first dive that God requires of each of us.

I need you – I have two hands and two feet and two eyes. But what I need of you requires that we each give up a hand, a foot, an eye. What I need you for requires that you dive into this church with all that you have. Stand on one foot – slightly off balance – and lean forward.

Contemporary preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says that Jesus would be a lousy parish minister. He would refuse to make that comfortable, safe place that church growth experts say will cause your church to grow in number.

So why don't we all – preachers and believers alike – just turn in our resignations right now? Because clearly, none of us has what it takes. If Jesus were in charge of an average congregation I figure there would be about four people left there on Sunday mornings, and chances are those four would be fooling themselves. Jesus would greet newcomers by saying, “Are you absolutely sure you want to follow this way of life? It will take everything you have. It has to come before everything else that matters to you. Plenty of people have launched out on it without counting the cost, and as you can see they are not here anymore. The other thing is, if you succeed – if you really do follow me – it will probably get you killed. Why don't you go home and think it over? I would hate for you to get in over your head.”
[“High Priced Discipleship” in *Bread of Angels*]

It takes someone a bit off-balance to follow Jesus so having only that one foot is to our advantage if we are to be true and faithful followers. I'm often tempted to bail out – I suspect you are tempted as well. But with one leg, you lean in, and it's all over. You dive in head first and you learn to swim.

I need you to dive into the work of God as manifested in this congregation.

God needs you. This is what God has created us for – to celebrate God's god-ness, God's creativity, God's gifts. And to celebrate God, we do that work which God calls out of us – that which Micah put so poetically – to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God [Micah 6:8]. We must serve God passionately, to serve faithfully. We have to sin boldly as Martin Luther said and serve the world as our parish as John Wesley said. God needs you – needs us – because we are all God has to do certain work in this place we call home.

There is a Hindu proverb which says, "When we take one step toward God, God takes seven steps toward us." Isn't that true? We move toward God and God rushes toward us. We lean in to God, off balance and confident as if we're at the ocean's edge with one leg, and God leans back toward us seven-fold. Once we make that first move – that dive into God from the edge of our belief – God gives us so much more confidence than we could ever have had without God.

This congregation needs you – 'cause guess what – there ain't nobody else. We must take seriously the business of growing – we each and all have to join in the work of this congregation and make God's work expand and explode. I don't care how old you are or young you are or busy you are or reluctant you are or how angry you are – you have to do it.

So what's up this year at Hope UMC as we start back into a regular church schedule? What opportunities, what possibilities, what potentialities are there?

There's worship. Stay consistent in your attendance. Stay consistent in your financial giving. Stay consistent in your desire to praise God in whatever we do in the Sanctuary on Sunday mornings. Worship whenever you get the opportunity to gather with members of the family we call Hope. Worship in all that we do together as a church.

Christian Education. Sunday School started again this month. Bring your children, grandchildren, neighbors, nieces and nephews. All ages, all sizes, all abilities. And don't forget that adult Christians continue to learn also – our adult Sunday School class meets every Sunday morning as well.

Music. Join the Chancel Choir, offer to present alternative music options, suggest special music guests that can inspire us. Think about the importance of music in what we do together and how you can contribute to our music ministry – we're open to creativity and suggestions. Instruments, special music, recorded music and videos.

Outreach. Explore what this congregation is about in its mission and outreach work. How many – shoeboxes filled with stuff for Operation Christmas Child, Breakfast Bags for Aid to Friends, pounds of soda can flip-tops for Ronald McDonald House, casseroles for St. John's Hospice, boxes filled with goodies for our Adopt-a-Soldier program, Christmas toys, food cupboard food, Heifer Project donations, etc, etc etc – have we sent out of here over the years. And it keeps happening only because Hope people work on it.

United Methodist Women (UMW). Get involved with one of our ongoing Circles which not only hook us up with strawberries and chili and apples but also connect us with so many others around the denomination. The Women's Division of the denominations General Board of Global Ministries is one of the strongest worldwide ministries that we have – our local UMW chapter is a part of this historically invaluable ministry. Our UMW

works diligently to bring us together and to support the ministries of our church around the world.

Heeding God's Call. You don't have to get arrested to make a difference. Colosimo's is under legal pressure from the feds, he's decided to close his store, no more guns will be leaving from that location ... and it happened because of prayer and commitment and determination. But the work isn't finished. We're headed to the Shooter Shop in Kensington next. Plans are in the works for approaching gun retailers out here in the suburbs – there's a MontCo/DelCo Heeding group that you could easily get involved with. We're forming in Harrisburg, in Lancaster, hopefully we'll spread to the rest of the state and the nation, who knows how far we can take this. Join us.

Youth Group is getting involved in an interfaith program called Walking the Walk through which we'll be connected to Jewish and Muslim youth from the area. Children's Programs are happening. Advent and Lenten study series. Car Washes. Dinners. Cleanup Days. Whatever happens as a part of this congregation is in need of you. One hand, one foot – whatever – lean in and take that hop forward. Dive in without testing the waters.

And most importantly, pray. Prayer for the growth of this congregation is absolutely necessary. And it's your job. Growth is not going to happen without prayer. I need to say that again ... *growth is not going to happen without prayer.* And a third time ... ***growth is not going to happen without prayer.*** Say it with me ... **growth is not going to happen without prayer.** Get the message? Ten minutes a day, half an hour a week, whatever time you can consistently commit is a way to scratch the surface. How about a weekend of prayer focused only on church growth? Maybe it would get us past at least one of the upper layers of resistance to growth that plagues every church. Maybe if we are about praying for growth every prayer minute of every day God gives us we'll accomplish something powerful. But it ain't happening without it, that's for sure. We have to pray!

There is no greater gift we can give back to God than having God's word take off through this congregation, this community, like the fire of Pentecost. Pray, pray, pray. We need one of your hands holding on to one of someone else's hands as we stand off-balance on one foot and surrender it all to God in prayer.

Can't find anything to do as the church exists now? Make suggestions. Ministry starts from the pews. Church growth experts are adamant about this – new programs do not bring in people; new people create programs that work.

I need you, God needs you, this congregation needs you. We are standing on the edge of something new and exciting. Is the temperature right? Are we going to get wet? Is there risk involved? Could we get hurt? Might we try and change our minds as we lean forward?

The beauty of the one-leg stance at the edge of the water is you dive right in and none of those questions really matters anymore. That beauty of being an off-balance follower of Jesus is that at the edge of doing what God wants us to do, we simply lean forward and the questions answer themselves.

Get rid of a leg, a hand, an eye. Dive in with me. There are some things that just work out better with one rather than two.

Amen.