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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

September 26, 2021

Year B, Proper 21, Track 2, Revised Common Lectionary

[Numbers 11:4-6,10-16,24-29](#)

[Psalm 19:7-14](#)

[James 5:13-20](#)

[Mark 9:38-50](#)

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Morgan Stickney was 15, and she was a rising star.¹ She was a swimmer with Olympic potential. Then came the day when she was warming up before a race, doing a few jumps by the poolside, and broke two tiny, jelly-bean sized bones in her left foot. It seemed like it would keep her out for a couple of months, but the bones didn't heal, and didn't heal. She became dependent on opioids for the crushing pain. Surgery followed surgery, then came a staph infection. Almost six years went by before she made the tough decision in 2018 to have her left foot amputated.

¹ See David Waldstein, "A Swimmer Saved By What She Lost," *New York Times* (March 3, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/03/sports/morgan-stickney-swimming-amputee.html>; David Waldstein, "A Swimmer Thrived After an Amputation. Then She Needed Another," *New York Times* (Dec. 27, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/27/sports/swimmer-amputation-paralympics.html>;

It was a tough decision but a good one. It gave her her life back. And it gave her her swimming back. She joined the U.S. Paralympic team and started training for the 2020 Tokyo Paralympics. Then came the day in 2019 when she broke another bone, this time in her right foot. And it didn't heal. It turned out she had a rare circulatory condition that kept blood from reaching her feet. It was why her left foot had never healed in the first place. And so Morgan Stickney again made the tough decision, and she had her right foot amputated.

The recovery was brutal. Her epidural failed and she went through searing pain. Then she had to learn to walk again using two prosthetics instead of one. Finally she returned to the pool yet again. She started to train. And against the odds, she made the Paralympic team again. Three weeks ago at the Tokyo Paralympics she won the gold medal in her 400 meter freestyle race. Then swimming the last lap in the U.S. women's 4 x 100 meter relay she performed an almost unbelievable comeback to claim the gold for her team as well.

It's a great story. It's a triumph story, with a great arc: adversity; more adversity; tough sacrifices; hard work; and victory in the end. It's also a story that a lot of disabled folks would like to remind us to be careful about how we celebrate it. It can be tempting for many people either to put people with disabilities on a pedestal or else to ignore them altogether. Morgan Stickney is a great athlete, not a curiosity or a Hallmark movie. And most people's stories of disabilities or amputations or life-altering injuries or diseases aren't about a great story arc and ending up in the Paralympics but about everyday life with all its ordinary ups and downs plus some very unique ones.

Most of us don't have the experience of what it's like to be an elite-level athlete. But we can still imagine our way into what it might be like to face the choice of a surgery that will remove a part of your body. Maybe some of you here today have faced that choice. A mastectomy or a prostate removal or a limb amputation or something else. It's a radical intervention. One that comes at a significant cost. And sometimes it's a necessary one. Sometimes it's the only thing that will save your life, or will give you your life back.

Jesus says to his disciples, "If your hand or your foot makes you stumble, cut it off. If your eye makes you stumble, tear it out. Better to lose these parts of your body than to lose your chance at eternal life." And Christians have been stumbling over these sayings themselves ever since. What a terrible choice. And yet what if that was really the choice? Many people have made the choice to save their earthly lives as the cost of a part of their bodies. Just as a thought experiment, if you knew—really know—that your eternal destiny depended on sacrificing part of your body—who among us wouldn't do it? There are legends that some Christians have actually taken Jesus' words literally over the years. The great theologian Origen was rumored to have castrated himself to try to avoid lust—although that may have just been a rumor spread by his enemies.

But most interpreters have rightly understood these words differently. Jesus doesn't seem to have actually wanted his disciples to wound themselves. And the reality is that our sin doesn't come from our eyes, or our feet, or our hands. Jesus says elsewhere in the Gospel of Mark that the food we eat doesn't pollute us because it goes into the stomach and then out, but what really pollutes is the evil intentions of the heart. How much easier it would be if we could actually just slice off those things within us that harm and destroy the image of God in each of us. If only we could do a physical surgery that would get rid of our inner prejudice, racism, sexism. Or compulsions, addictions, self-destructive behavior. If only there was a surgery for selfishness, hardheartedness, malicious gossip, or hatred for self or others.

There's a context to this gospel story we should also take into account. John is one of the disciples; Jesus nicknamed him and his brother James the "Sons of Thunder" presumably because they're so impetuous. In another place when a village doesn't welcome Jesus, James and John ask if they can pray for fire from heaven to come down and destroy the village. Jesus says no. And in today's gospel passage John is again concerned about someone not showing Jesus and the disciples the proper respect. Someone out there is using Jesus' name to do exorcisms without actually belonging to their group. But when John tries to stop him, Jesus says no: let him be; whoever isn't against us is for us. And it's then that Jesus starts to speak about this kind of radical surgery on the self.

Jesus is taking John's instinct—and all of our instinct—to cut off outsiders and redirecting it somewhere else. It's something similar to the time when Jesus says, "Who are you to judge the speck in someone else's eye? First take the log out of your own eye." The commentator Dennis Hamm says Jesus is challenging the disciples—and by extension, challenging us—to "be inclusive with regard to people we perceive as "outsiders," and instead take some of our instinct for decisive exclusion and address it to aspects of our lives that may need that kind of radical surgery if our life with God is to be preserved and enhanced."

Now none of us can actually do that on our own. We can make new year's resolutions and engage in self-examination and sometimes make a little progress on a bad habit or two. But the real change of our hearts takes something else. It takes the power of God.

The book of Hebrews says that "the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, able to cut through our spirits and souls and joints and marrow, to really discover the thoughts and intentions of the heart." The Word of God can mean scripture. But in its fuller deeper sense, it means Jesus himself: the fullness of God, the full expression of God. And Jesus has been changing hearts for thousands of years.

Sometimes he does it in a moment. Sometimes it's a long slow patient process of gentle release. He does it in many ways. He uses the sacraments: baptism and holy communion, two of his most favorite tools. He does it in this life, and I think for most if not all of us he'll be doing it in some way after we leave this life as well, because none of us finishes our earthly course fully ready for the full presence of God. He knows what in our spirits is truly part of us and what is choking out God's image within us and needs to be cut away. He may ask sacrifices of us, but he will never do us harm. For he is the Great Physician of our souls.