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Mark 9:38-50  
Five or Ten, Again!

Usually when we have an inflated reaction to something, there's a story there - when we fly off the handle, when something gets under our skin.

A "five or ten" response might be in order, to assess, where is this coming from? What is going on? A mindful approach to life will have us examine what underlies our strong or exaggerated reactions.

Probably the first time Erdal ever witnessed a scary side of me was when he came home from a day at work while I had been home all day with infant Hannah. Sleep-deprived already, by 6 p.m. I couldn't see straight and felt the injustice of Erdal "getting" to go to work while I had to keep this baby alive.

I was so frazzled and beside myself that when he opened the door to the nursery, I threw a Time magazine across the room and blurted, "Take her!"

The look on his face was a mixture of: *Who did I marry...what happened... sorry I have to earn a living...and, okay, I'll take her.* We laughed at my ridiculousness, and I don't know what happened after that. Somehow, I mothered someone to adulthood.

I recently told Hannah this story, as if I was letting her in on a little secret that isn't a secret at all - adults throw tantrums. I share this somewhat innocuous if not embarrassing instance of what we all experience at one time or another: *"I don't know what got into me."*

We may not know, but chances are, there are plausible explanations. For little ones, or us, it may be hunger or fatigue. Consider, too, the reservoir of accumulated hurts and scabs that can get knocked open when someone inadvertently steps on your landmine. A five or ten response could come in handy. To avoid a disproportionate reaction.

A lot of our time is spent either reacting or responding to life. 'Tis better in some cases to respond to something than to react. But not *all* the time. Reactions can save lives. Reactions are gifts from God in immediate

situation that pose a danger...when the snake crosses your path. Our 9/11 firefighters reacted by going up not down those Twin Tower stairs.

But most of life calls for responses. *What should I do in this situation? What is the best way to go? What does the Lord require of me right now, with this person, in this circumstance.* We don't always choose the best.

People will define sin, from the Greek, as missing the mark, an archery term meaning to miss the bulls-eye. We miss the mark when we sin.

But the archery imagery doesn't describe the fallout from missing the mark. The arrow of our errors can stab someone, or hurt us, upending the trajectory of our lives. It can be devastating. Hence, we have Jesus here, in hyperbole, warning: **it is a world better to never have missed the mark.**

Leading children astray is tantamount to murdering yourself. Those hurt by adults when young know that you don't get over it; you may get beyond it, you may even dip into forgiveness, but it is never erased. Like a scar leaves a trace of the wound, the hurt leaves its mark.

I visited *Sing Sing* prison once while I was in seminary. That's where the worst offenders from *Law and Order* episodes go, **and** those in real life. I met men burdened by shame and remorse. Not all of them — criminals are notorious for denial and blame — but the ones I met shared their regret. No one said it outright, but I could hear them saying:

*We would have rather cut off our hand or arm than to have done what we did. We would rather have lost an eye - here, I will give you my eye - if you let me go back to undo what I've done! I would trade both my legs for the chance to get that moment back and choose differently.*

We can relate. Large or small, we know how regret rests in the chest like a mammoth boulder, chaining us to the past. We can relate. Going to visit the prisoner, referenced in Matthew 25, is not just about reaching out to *them*, it also serves to reach "in" to our own imprisonment, seeing ourselves in them. We see what we share in common, a humanity for which Christ died and was resurrected.

The disciples grumble about someone not in their group doing something good for someone else. Jesus will have none of it. He redirects the

subject. *Leave them alone - focus on preventing yourself from doing something hellish. Life on earth can be hellish.*

We can be forgiven what we've done; **it's forgiving ourselves** — that can be the great difficulty. For some people, saying, "*God forgives you*" sounds right, it can be music to despairing ears, but the slog toward self-forgiveness can take a very long time.

It can take every Sunday coming to church hearing over and over that God forgives. Over and over, the repetition, the tender consistency of the message, the reminder that Jesus forgave his betrayers, even his killers. The rhythm of worship can help us integrate forgiveness into our own bodies such that we forgive *ourselves*... for any of the things for which we'd trade a hand or eye to get back and do again.

I think of those parents who accidentally leave their kids in hot cars. How would I forgive myself if I did that? I would be desperate for a forgiving God to help me forgive myself. The wound would be so gaping and ghastly that I would need a community like you to show me how to take a step forward and live into another day. I would need Christ, in the body of you collectively, to show me forgiveness and grace, to show me that my identity was not defined by my one grievous lapse, my one death-producing act of forgetfulness.

Missing the mark includes sins of commission and omission. What we do and fail to do. What we mean to do and don't mean to do. Using our phones and pads, we don't intend that poor children are mining for the cobalt needed to supply our want for technology. Sin abounds.

Jesus is talking about sins of commission, of course; if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. So what do we do, then, Jesus? He says come from a place of peace. How do we get there, Jesus?

From the Protestant Reformation we inherit the insistence that we can't *do* anything; everything we truly needs comes by way of grace. But there is a doing without doing, what Centering Prayer calls "consenting," to the Christ that is in you. It's like getting out of our own way. It's looking not outside ourselves but inside, to the still, small voice. As Father Richard Rohr said on Friday to over 5,100 of us across the world, "*The only thing that separates you from God is the thought that you are separate!*"

But there's plenty that keeps us separated from the reality of union. Jesus would imagine us cutting off a metaphorical hand or eye that leads us nowhere but regret. Regret keeps us attached to ourselves alone.

Be careful little eyes what you see! Turn off the porn. Turn off the news programming full of grievance and lies. Look to those you admire, not those who trigger your rage. If your hand too easily makes a fist, if only in your heart, create a new pathway in your brain by doing something else — meditation, prayer, doing something for someone else. We don't save ourselves, but we do consent to being saved! Often, our own desperation and helplessness leads us to consent.

Sometimes it need only take "five or ten" seconds to restore us to our right minds, the mind of Christ. Or, it could take five or ten minutes. "Excuse me, I have to use the restroom." Or, "I need some air" - go outside to take in some oxygen. There are some recoveries that take five or ten years. Our lives aren't like a show that wraps up in seven episodes. Our lives are complicated by complicated people who can take us five or ten years to forgive. Forgiveness is a process, seldom a one-time event.

Jesus urges his listeners to be at peace with one another. Regret and grudges prevent peace. We **do** need to forgive and be forgiven to know peace. We have to forgive ourselves and others to be at peace.

The disciples would go on to carry the worst kind of regret — betraying the one they loved. Imagine it. And we do, too, betray him when we betray others, with what we do and fail to do. But we're here to hear the Gospel, of the resurrected Jesus, resurrecting us, from our wounds and regrets, leading us to peace. In Hebrew, both breath and spirit are the same word - indeed the Lord is in us, breathing us toward resurrection, breathing us to peace, in five or ten seconds, five or ten years, depending on the circumstance.

The bull's eye imagery of sin misses the mark when making the mark perfection or purity or doing good. The mark, as modeled by Jesus himself, is union with God. When the guys at Sing Sing and we in the pews accept our original blessing, that we belong to God and each other, we all move closer to the commonwealth of God, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Charge, from Father Richard Rohr: All God wants from me is to become who I really am. And I already am - I just don't know it.