

Thomas R. Cook  
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota  
9:00 and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist  
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 27, 2015

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“Floyd Strikes Again (but he doesn't *really* strike)”

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Scripture: Mark 9:38-50; 17 Pentecost B (Proper 21)

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My sixth grade teacher's name was Floyd. Of course we would never call him Floyd to his face; he was Mr. Ross. And we were scared of Mr. Ross. Because this was back in the day when he could keep his long white paddle next to his desk, conspicuously in our view, and he was good at using it. You can take my word for it.

Anyway, this classmate of mine thought he would try to be Floyd's favorite, so while the class was on recess, all of us playing around outside, and while Floyd was off taking care of a little business elsewhere, having left us in the care of other teachers, my classmate went into our room and erased clean all the chalkboards. Then he brought the erasers outside to start banging them together to clean them up too. And we saw him hard at work, so we went and asked him: “What are you doing?” And he said: “I cleaned off all the chalkboards in there, and now I'm cleaning the erasers.” And we all looked at each other and just started to laugh. And our buddy thought we were making fun of him for trying to be helpful, and he yelled at us: “Hey! Knock it off! What's the big deal?” So we told him... All that stuff he cleaned off the

chalkboards, all three of them with all that writing, just happened to be a math assignment that Floyd had prepared for us to complete that afternoon. He had written all those questions and equations up there for us to work on. And our brilliant buddy had somehow missed that little piece of information and had cleared every bit of that work off the boards. And, boy, was he gonna get it.

“You’re dead!” somebody shouted. “You might as well hand Floyd the paddle when he gets back,” said another. “No, you might as well go walk across the highway with your eyes closed,” said another. “You better run away now! Safer than staying here!”

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Now, what do you all think? Do you think we sixth graders really thought it was all that bad? Did we really think our buddy was “dead”? Or that it was really good advice to just hand Floyd his paddle. Or did we really mean our friend would be better off walking in the highway? Or that running away was a good idea?

We wouldn’t have known what to call it in sixth grade, but we sure knew how to use it, just like every other kid does: *Hyperbole*. That’s the fancy word for it.

Hyperbole. Hyperbole defined: Given to extravagant exaggeration, as in a “*mile-high ice cream cone*” or an “*endless buffet*.”

*“I’m so tired I could sleep for a month!”* Really? That would be something. *“If I hear that song one more time, my ears will explode!”* Wow. That’s pretty serious. But how about these words?... *“If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. Or if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. Or if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out. ...better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell...”* Now isn’t that taking things a little too far?

It’s hard to avoid the harshness of these words that Jesus chooses in order to impress something upon his followers. Clearly something has stirred Jesus’ concern, something very serious, serious enough even to be given to hyperbole. For I do not hold it to be a truth of the Christian faith that Jesus actually intends that we lame and maim ourselves as a part of our faith and life. I do, however, believe that Jesus is clearly concerned about certain behaviour and its serious consequences for our life and our soul. So, just like my buddy in the sixth grade who had done something worthy of our hyperbole, so too had the disciples gone far enough to warrant the same from Jesus.

And what was this offensive action that drew so much concern from Jesus that he would speak like he does? In a word: hubris. An overwhelming pride or conceit in themselves. An overinflated sense of their own importance.

Look, some of Jesus' followers just have an ongoing issue with their own status. They argue about which of them is the most important, when Jesus said the greatest would be a servant of all. He told them that the weakness of a little child was more suited to a holy life. Yet in today's story from Mark's gospel, they are on the street protecting their turf, turning on others who might be preaching about Jesus, but who aren't in their "inner circle." Jesus didn't have a problem with others preaching about him. But he did have a problem with his disciples' over-exaggerated sense of their own importance, their "ownership" of Jesus and his power, their heavy-handed attempted to put another person down to protect their own positions. So he tells them to stop it. In very harsh terms. *Man, you act like that and you would be better off sinking in the ocean. Try to live that way, and you would be better off without hands or feet or sight, if those things are causing you to be unfaithful. You will miss the entire point of my teaching and become conceited, powerful, selfish, and proud. Do whatever it takes NOT to go there.*

Funny that such harsh images, such powerful and demanding preaching as Jesus uses this morning, is given over to a lesson on *humility*, of all things. Not on politics; not on human sexuality; not on which religion is better than any other.

Humility. Jesus reveals throughout his life and words that humility, care for the helpless, selflessness, peace, and love are the very things that make life worth living. As we go about our daily lives, how much better off we will be when we emulate this humble, generous, helpful, dedicated, prayerful, spirited man, this *Son of God*. Keep our hands and our feet and our eyes. Better to use them to live as Christ would have us live, humbly in peace and love with one another.

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Now, needless to say, when Floyd returned to our classroom and found his math work entirely erased from the blackboards, he was a pretty upset. His face got all scrunched up and red, like it always did when he was about to strike. He made a quick move toward that paddle. And we were all tense, waiting for the fireworks, but they never came. Instead, Floyd sat down at his desk, listened to what our friend had to say, realized it was all a mistake. And he forgave him. Just like that. No harm done. And we had been so sure our buddy was a goner.

All this makes me wonder about the importance of God's love and mercy... You know maybe the one time when Jesus never practices hyperbole is when he talks about the depth of the love and mercy of God for us and for this Creation. And maybe there is no exaggeration intended whatsoever when he calls us, his followers, to look out for others, to be humble, to forgive those who hurt us, to welcome those

others will not welcome. There is no exaggeration in asking us to love our neighbor as ourselves, or in striving for justice and peace among all persons, or in respecting the dignity of every human being.

For all the hyperbole in today's scripture, I gather there is no hyperbole in this:  
Do to others as you would have them do to you.