

What we cut off (Mark 9:38-50)

Maybe the shock of Jesus' words is the point.

by [Nanette Sawyer](#)

September 24, 2021

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

It's rare that Jesus shocks us.

This week's passage from Mark recounts shocking words coming from Jesus. He speaks of chopping off hands and feet, tearing out an eye, being drowned by a heavy stone tied around one's neck. This does not sound like our beloved and loving Savior!

I think the shock is the point. We read these words, and strong emotions rise up in us. Jesus essentially throws a glass of water into the faces of the disciples: *Wake up! Take notice! This is serious!* When someone throws a glass of water in our face, we certainly take notice.

The idea of people placing stumbling blocks in front of children is what brings Jesus to make such strong statements. A stumbling block would prevent one from following, from drawing close to Jesus, from being part of the community of followers. A stumbling block can cause injury—a stubbed toe, a broken leg, a head injury.

It does make sense that Jesus would want to protect the children from stumbling. But it's not just the children, it's the disciples themselves who are stumbling. If your hand/foot/eye "causes you to stumble," remove the cause of stumbling. Of course, it's not the actual hand/foot/eye that causes stumbling, it's something about how we use our bodies that brings about injury, isolation, loss of faith, spiritual death, or

even physical death. *Wake up! Take notice! This is serious!*

Jesus is saying that there is something that can be done to address our stumbling—but what exactly is that? He seems to suggest that there is a wholeness that looks different from what we think. It's not having two working hands, two working feet, or two working eyes that bring us into the kingdom of God. It's better "to enter life" with one foot, he says, than to stumble with two feet. It's what we do with what we have that matters.

These verses about stumbling blocks come immediately after the story of the disciples trying to stop a man from casting out demons in the name of Jesus, because the man was not following Jesus with the other disciples. Instead of chopping off the parts of themselves that are problematic, the disciples want to chop off other people.

It's as though the disciples are saying that whoever is not for them is against them. *He's not one of us, so we should stop him.* But Jesus flips that, of course. It's an important switch that can lead us to ask ourselves how we see the people who we don't know. Jesus does not deny that there are people who are against us. We have adversaries that we are right to resist. As usual, Jesus calls us to deep discernment about our expectations of others, as well as the tendencies within ourselves. Do we move through the world assuming that people are against us until they prove otherwise? Or do we move through the world assuming that people are for us?

The Common English Bible translation gives this section of scripture the heading "Recognize your allies." Perhaps before we chop people off we could consider the parts of ourselves that cause us to want to. Is there something that we can let go of within ourselves before we excise people from our community?