

**Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Yr. A**  
**February 12, 2017**  
**Father Mike Holloran**

“It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body thrown into Gehenna,” said the Lord. True, no doubt, in the sense of “less bad” to lose one of your members. Gehenna is another name for hell. So here the Lord is contrasting two things that are both undesirable-- to be maimed (not a good thing) versus to have your whole body thrown into Gehenna (an even worse thing). So humanity seems to be in dire straits, having to decide between bad things, choosing the lesser of two evils.

These verses show up again in Matthew later on, in chapter 18. There they are phrased similarly but with an important difference. In chapter 18 Jesus says:

“It is better for you to enter into life maimed than with two hands be thrown into fiery Gehenna.” (Mt. 18:8-9)

Here there's greater emphasis on the great good to be attained – to enter into life. Gehenna is hell. “Enter into life” means eternal life, perfect joy and peace, perfect fulfillment in communion with God and all His saints, with no fear of death or possibility of loss hanging over the happiness.

To enter into life would be such an incredible good, such an out of proportion gain that any physical loss suffered in this life would disappear into irrelevance.

This is a happy thought indeed, but we are still left with the unhappy-- no, the horrible-- thought of tearing out your own eye, or cutting off your own hand. Could Jesus have meant this literally?

There's a story about Origen, an early Christian theologian, that he was so troubled by a certain temptation that he cut off a certain body part. The story is told with no hint of approval.

So while it may be better to enter life maimed than to have your whole self thrown into Gehenna, it is better yet to change your heart, to discipline your desires, to out-smart your addicted brain. Surely the same Lord who restored sight and mobility does not really want us to maim ourselves, but to find healing for sick thoughts. Yes, the hand can reach out to an evil deed, the eye can look at something that will tempt, the foot can walk into an occasion of sin, but don't our hands, eyes, and feet take direction from our thoughts? And doesn't Jesus tell us in this same passage that we can commit adultery in our hearts without lifting a finger? So, don't amputate the finger, change the heart.

Easier said than done, I know. But that's what grace is for. We admire athletic feats on the playing field, like that amazing catch by Julian Edelman in the Super Bowl. While diving into a tumbling crowd he somehow reached between arms and legs to grasp the ball, then

for a split second let it go to get a better grip, just inches from the turf but not touching it. Wow! We marvel, and rightly so. But I have seen equally marvelous feats of focused determination in the lives of people who have, in the midst of tumbling toward Gehenna, reached through tangles of evil example, disordered desires, ingrained habit and demonic influence to snatch their own souls from destruction. I marvel at that, at what they do, at the grace that does it in them.

Focused determination. “If you choose, you can keep the commandments.”  
This doesn't mean on your own, without God's grace.

“If you trust in God, you shall live”, because God will give you the courage and focus you need to follow through on your good choices.

“Before man are life and death, good and evil, whichever he chooses shall be given him.”  
Decisions can be difficult to make, harder to keep, but impossible to avoid because they face us every day. Not that every decision every day has dire life and death consequences, but every one does contribute to making us who we are-- more decisive or less, stronger in virtue or weaker, more courageous or more fearful.

We can't do it on our own, so we must pray, and trust. On the other hand, God isn't going to do it for us, so we must educate ourselves, pluck up our courage, and even practice! So let's practice a little setting priorities and making decisions.

(Exercise with various things marked on cards, pitting one against another, choosing)