



St. Mary's
Episcopal Church

October 3, 2021

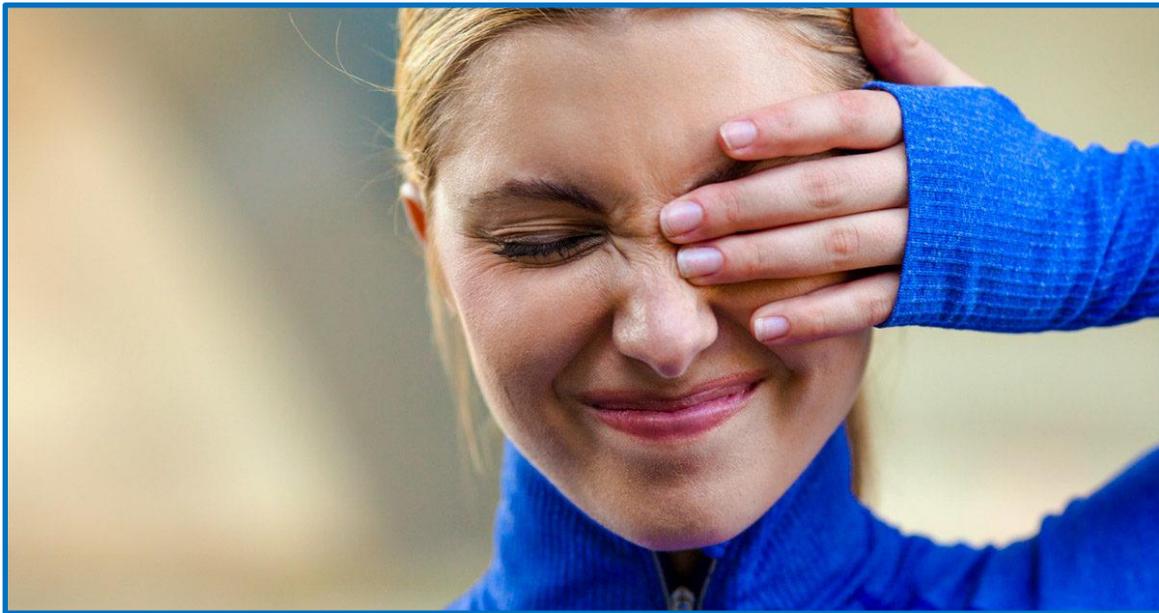
Message by Rev. Michael Burke

Delighting in This World

Here. Now. As It Is. As You Are. As We Are.

Working toward God's Dream

For Everyone. For Everything. All the Time.



“And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell...”

- *The Gospel According to St. Mark 9:47*

Medical advice link: <https://www.healthline.com/health/poked-in-the-eye>

Know Where Your Towel is.

Good morning and welcome to **Poke Your Eye Out Sunday**. The history of this unusual and occasional feast day at St. Mary's goes back to 2013, when our then-Associate Rector Sara Gavit declared it her favorite Sunday of the liturgical year, and wondered aloud if we had all come to worship prepared with our own stick.

So, if you came prepared this year, first – Thank You, and second – put down the stick. I think we can talk this through.

You see, Jesus sometimes says strange and enigmatic things, and today’s Gospel is a good example.

“And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell...” (Mark 9:47)

What, exactly, are we supposed to do with that? Let’s back up and see how we got here.

In this section of the Gospel according to St. Mark, Jesus has been out teaching among the crowds. Recall that back in Chapter 4, verse 33, Mark tells us that “Jesus did not speak to them except in parables” so we all can be certain he is not speaking literally here about maiming ourselves.

Flannery O’Connor, that great American Southern Gothic writer, once said that when you can assume your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the vision-impaired you draw large and startling figures.¹

In speaking to the crowd Jesus uses several shocking images – poking your eye out, cutting a limb off (don’t worry, it’s just a flesh wound – Monty Python, not Jesus of Nazareth), And in teaching of such things, Jesus speaks about a “stumbling block.” At least that is the translation in several versions of our English Bible. Jesus is speaking, of course, in Aramaic, but Mark is writing the Gospel in Greek, and the word Mark uses is *skandalon*². It could mean a stone causing you to stumble, but it was also commonly used during that time period to describe a live trap, such as one used to snare or catch an animal. Something not noticed at first, that lies as a hidden danger, unseen in the tall grass.

Skandalon is the same word used in the Gospel passage I preached on three weeks ago, when in Matthew 16:23, Jesus has been explaining his mission to the disciples and Peter rebukes Jesus, saying “saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’”³

But Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a *stumbling-block* to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

So what are these “stumbling blocks,” these snares and live traps hidden in the tall grass of life that are so dangerous, so important to avoid that Jesus would use such startling attention-getting images as “it’s better to poke your own eye out” than fall into them.

¹ Flannery O’Connor, 1925–1964, paraphrased in *Working Preacher*, for the date 09/26/2021:

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-26-2/commentary-on-mark-938-50>

² <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g4625/kjv/tr/0-1/>

³ Matthew 16:22

It might be helpful here to look at two things: the Matthew passage I just read from is followed two verses later (in Matthew 16:26) with Jesus saying “For what will it profit anyone if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?”.

Sara Gavit taught me, and the Scriptures teach me, that there are things in life that so catch our attention, that can so “capture” us with their dazzle, that we risk missing out on what is most important in faith and life.

I don’t need to list here all the things that can dazzle us with false sparkle. They are probably unique to each of us. What has flash and sparkle in *your* life that can divert your attention from what is truly important in life? We sometimes speak of “living the questions...” That’s a question for us all to live out this next week.

Whatever those false idols might be, I think they are lot like cotton candy. Cotton candy comes in bright colors of swirled goodness, all of which taste sweet on the tongue. Who can eat cotton candy and not have a smile on their face?

But soon the enjoyment is over when the cotton candy is gone. Like the appetites of our wants, we are never left fully sated, never completely satisfied. For in a short time, our tongues crave more. And even if we eat our fill, time and time again, our bellies are never full, or never full for long. In fact, after several large helpings of cotton candy, we feel just a little bit queasy... and ill at ease.

Like our “wants” for material things, the answer “how much is enough?” is always answered in our culture, “just a little bit more.” Whether the object of our pursuit be comfort, pleasure, security, or wealth, it satisfies, but never in a lasting or completely fulfilling way. We can feed our sense of self, even binge on these things, if our circumstances or resources allow, but even then, our “happiness” is often followed by a certain emptiness that is hard to describe, a hollow place within that haunts us like ghost of other lives we could have lived. Hold that thought.

+++++++ *turn signal* ++++++

This past week, there’s been a lot of mis-guided mis-application or perhaps trivializing of the experience of the holocaust. Let’s remember what really happened.

In the cold, cold winter of January 1945, Soviet troops were advancing on the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz. The Nazi overseers evacuated the prisoners who were able to walk, and forced them out into the snow on a death march. One of those who stumbled through the dark and bitter cold of that night was known only as prisoner 119104.

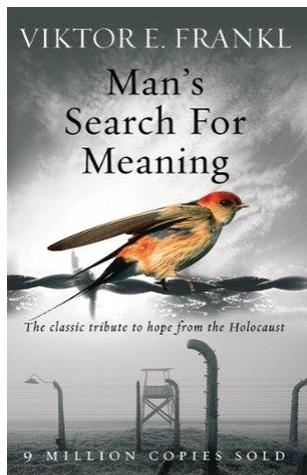


Later, he wrote:

... We stumbled on in the darkness, over big stones and through large puddles, along the one road leading from the camp. The accompanying guards kept shouting at us and driving us with the butts of their rifles. Anyone with very sore feet supported himself on his neighbor's arm. Hardly a word was spoken; the icy wind did not encourage talk. Hiding his mouth behind his upturned collar, the man marching next to me whispered suddenly: "If our wives could see us now! I do hope they are better off in their camps and don't know what is happening to us."

That brought thoughts of my own wife to mind. And as we stumbled on for miles, slipping on icy spots, supporting each other time and again, dragging one another up and onward, nothing was said, but we both knew: each of us was thinking of his wife. Occasionally I looked at the sky, where the stars were fading and the pink light of the morning was beginning to spread behind a dark bank of clouds. But my mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me, saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look. Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise.

*A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth—that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: **The salvation of man is through love and in love.***



That prisoner, number 119104, lost his pregnant wife, his brother, his parents, and almost all of his family in that camp, before it was liberated on January 27th, 1945. But he survived. After his release, he took nine days and wrote down 184 pages of text in German, which became a book that today's Library of Congress calls "one of the ten most influential books in American history."⁴ It has sold over 10 million copies and been translated into twenty four different languages.⁵

That man, prisoner 119104, was Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist and neurologist from Vienna. Those 184 pages were published as "*Man's Search for Meaning*." In it, Frankl contends that it is the very pursuit of happiness that thwarts happiness. The pursuit of dazzling, shiny things can snare us, trap us, and distract from what is truly important in life.

Fulfillment in life, Frankl argues, is found in something much more deep and substantial than material things, or even the concept of "happiness" itself. Fulfillment is found in the search for meaning in life,

⁴ From Wikipedia, accessed September 23, 2015. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Man%27s_Search_for_Meaning

⁵ Ibid.

and *not simply* in constantly *asking* the question itself, “what is the meaning of life?” (I know, Hitchhikers of the Galaxy fans, its “42.”)⁶

Frankl writes that he came to realize that “ *it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us.* We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead think of ourselves as those who were being questioned *by life*—daily and hourly. Our question must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which life constantly sets for each individual.”⁷

What was really needed, Frankl tells us, was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life. “It is a characteristic of the American culture that, again and again, one is commanded and ordered to ‘be happy.’ But happiness cannot be *pursued*; it must *ensue*. One must have a reason to ‘be happy.’”

In a recent study published in a major psychological journal,⁸ the authors found that *happiness without meaning* characterizes a relatively shallow, self-absorbed or even selfish life, in which things go well, needs and desire are easily satisfied, and difficult or taxing entanglements are avoided,” the authors write.

But *meaning*, they find, is not only about transcending the self, but also about transcending the present moment -- which is perhaps the most important finding of the study, according to the researchers. While happiness is an emotion felt in the here and now, it ultimately fades away, just as all emotions do; likewise the positive affect and feelings of pleasure are fleeting. The amount of time people report feeling good or bad correlates with happiness but not at all with meaning.⁹

Meaning, on the other hand, is enduring. It connects the past to the present to the future. In the words of Martin E. P. Seligman, one of the leading psychological scientists



⁶ In Douglas Adams’s cult classic book, *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*, the Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, The Universe, and Everything from the supercomputer [Deep Thought](http://www.deepthought.com), specially built for this purpose, is inexplicably “42”. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phrases_from_The_Hitchhiker's_Guide_to_the_Galaxy

⁷ *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl, Beacon Press, 2006. p. 77.

⁸ *Journal of Positive Psychology*, <http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rpos20/current>

⁹ *A Psychiatrist Who Survived the Holocaust Explains Why Meaningfulness Matters More Than Happiness*, in *The Atlantic*, October 22, 2014. Authored by Emily Esfahani Smith. See: <http://www.businessinsider.com/a-lesson-about-happiness-from-a-holocaust-survivor-2014-10>

alive today, in the meaningful life "you use your highest strengths and talents to belong to and serve something you believe is larger than the self."¹⁰ That is central to how we experience and live out our faith. It is what the book of Proverbs calls "Lady Wisdom, Madame Insight."¹¹

Or to badly paraphrase Jesus: Hey! This is important. Better that you poke your eye out with a stick than to have both eyes and fail to see this.

Again, friends....

Live boldly and have faith.

"Happy Poke Your Eye Out Sunday."

Now, throw that stick away.

Notes:



Today, "hell" is literally in the shadow of high-rise apartments:

Gehenna is the word in the Greek text of Mark's Gospel that is translated into today's reading as "hell", Gehenna originally was a valley west and south of [Jerusalem](#) where children were burned as sacrifices to the Ammonite god [Moloch](#). This practice was carried out by the Israelites during the reigns of King Solomon in the 10th century BCE and King [Manasseh](#) in the 7th century BCE and continued until the [Babylonian Exile](#) in the 6th century BCE. Gehenna later was made a garbage center to discourage a reintroduction of such sacrifices.

The imagery of the burning of humans supplied the concept of "hellfire" to Jewish and Christian eschatology. Mentioned several times in the New Testament (*e.g.*, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and James) as a place in which fire will destroy the wicked, it also is noted in the [Talmud](#), a compendium of Jewish law, lore, and commentary, as a place of purification, after which one is released from further torture.¹²

Image to the right: "Gehenna" depicted in art as a place of torment.



¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Proverbs 3:13-18, from *The Message* paraphrase of the Bible by Eugene Peterson.

¹² From: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gehenna>

Scripture Readings chosen for October 3, 2021

Hebrew Scriptures

FIRST READING

Proverbs 3:13-18, from *The Message*

A Reading from Proverbs.

You're blessed when you meet Lady Wisdom,
when you make friends with Madame Insight.

She's worth far more than money in the bank;
her friendship is better than a big salary.

Her value exceeds all the trappings of wealth;
nothing you could wish for holds a candle to her.

With one hand she gives long life,
with the other she confers recognition.

Her manner is beautiful,
her life wonderfully complete.

She's the very Tree of Life to those who embrace her.
Hold her tight—and be blessed!



Artwork: "Sophia, Divine Wisdom" by Mary Plaster, <http://www.maryplaster.com>

The Psalm

Give judgment for me, O God, for I have lived with integrity;
I have trusted in you and have not faltered.

Test me, O God, and try me;
examine my heart and my mind.

For your love is before my eyes;
I have walked faithfully with you.

I have not sat with the worthless,
nor do I consort with the deceitful.

I have hated the company of evildoers;
I will not sit down with the wicked.

I will wash my hands in innocence, O God,
that I may go in procession round your altar,

Singing aloud a song of thanksgiving
and recounting all your wonderful deeds.

O God, I love the house in which you dwell
and the place where your glory abides.

Do not sweep me away with sinners
nor my life with those who thirst for blood,

Whose hands are full of evil plots
and their right hand full of bribes.

As for me, I will live with integrity;
redeem me, O God, and have pity on me.

The Gospel

Mark 9:38-50

John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

"For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."