

“Ooo, Gross!”

When I was in junior high and high school we often used the word “gross” to mean something that was disgusting and repulsive or just to describe something we did not like. Gross is the foreshortened form of the word grotesque. The Oxford Dictionary defines grotesque as something that is “comically or repulsively ugly or distorted.” In architecture we might call gargoyles grotesque. The exaggeration that marks the grotesque shows up in many art forms. Some comic strips have grotesque characters. Robert Crumb is famous for all of his characters being grotesque, although I do not find them particularly funny. Like my teenage self I find them gross. I am sure some of you have read stories by Flannery O’Connor. She was one of the great southern writers of the 20th century. She like some of her compatriots such as William Faulkner and Carson McCullers utilized the grotesque in her writing.

O’Connor’s is well-known for her use of the grotesque. She is quoted as saying “I use the grotesque the way I do because people are deaf and dumb and need help to see and hear.” What I think she means is that the grotesque catches our attention. The exaggeration of features whether they are physical or spiritual or emotional characteristics catches us off guard and reels us in. Once these exaggerations have pulled us into the story we are open and receptive to the point of the story. We have been bombarded by so much that it takes something strange and out of the ordinary to grab our attention. She was the master of this technique and used it very subtly. She does not hit us over the head with it, but it is there and we come along to see what these grotesque characters will do.

Jesus also liked using exaggeration and the grotesque, albeit before anyone used that term. Hyperbole catches our attention. We respond by wondering if he really meant that or we respond with revulsion. Today’s reading from Mark is a prime example. He says, “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.”¹ If you ever wondered from whence the fire and brimstone preacher got his inspiration here it is.

Does anyone think that Jesus really wanted us to hurt ourselves? I don’t. I think Jesus is using exaggeration in order to help us understand how serious he is. Jesus wants us to know that he cares about each of us. He knows we are going to make mistakes that will hurt other people and will hurt ourselves. So he tells us that if something causes us to make mistakes over and over and over again we should get rid of it. He wants us to get rid of those things that cause you to make mistakes.

Of course, our hands or feet or eyes don’t cause us to make mistakes. What causes us to make mistakes, to sin, is when we want something and we don’t care what we have to do to get it. It could be wanting something so much that we steal it. It could be wanting a prize so much that we cheat to get it. It could be that we want to be someone’s friend so we tell them a lie about someone else. What we want becomes

¹ Mark 9:43-49 NRSV

so important that we forget how much others love us and how much we love God, our family, our friends, even how much we love ourselves.

Jesus wants us to remember that when we want something that badly in the end it may cause us to hurt. Stealing, cheating, or lying may not hurt us now but they cause us to change. We are no longer the person we used to be. One of the tropes of murder mysteries is that the first murder is always the hardest. After you do a thing once you get used to it and better at it. That is the dark side of the old saw “practice makes perfect.” While doing something that is good might help us feel closer to God, to do something that is wrong will make us feel cut off from God.

Jesus tries to help us understand that so that we don't feel the hurt and sadness from being cut off from God and from those we love. Jesus loves us, despite all of our mistakes and grotesqueness. He loves us and wants us to be whole, happy, and fulfilled people. We do not need to be maimed, we just need to repent and return to God.