

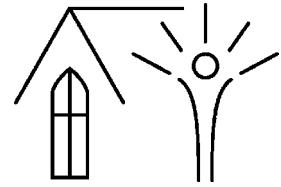


**ROSELLE**  
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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*Our Mission Statement:*

*“To Know Christ,  
To Grow in Christ,  
To Show Others Christ”*



October 1, 2006

**Sermon: “A Lesson of Elm Bark Beetles”**

Mark 9:38-50

Reverend Thomas Kim

Some of you may remember a ridiculous, time-honored story about an old country preacher who had a teenage son.

*One day, while the boy was at school, his father decided to try an experiment. He went into the boy’s room and placed on his desk three objects; a Bible, a silver dollar, and a bottle of whisky. “Now then,” the old preacher said to himself, “If he picks up the Bible, he’s going to be a preacher like me. If he picks up the dollar, he’s going to be a businessman, and that would be okay, too. But if he picks up the bottle of whisky, he’s going to be a no-good drunkard.”*

*Soon the old man heard his son’s footsteps as he came in the house. He watched as the boy walked over to inspect the three items on the desk. First, the boy picked up the Bible and placed it under his arm. Then he picked up the silver dollar and dropped it into his pocket. Finally, he uncorked the bottle and took a big drink.*

*“Lord have mercy,” the old man whispered, “He’s gonna be a politician!”*

I guess we could say that, unless you are going to be a politician, you are going to have to make some choices in life. Life is matter of choices.

Today’s sermon comes with a warning label because it is a challenge for you to ask how you make your own choice in life. Today’s gospel lesson confronts us with chill warnings as well. Jesus uses exaggerated notions and actions to make his disciples face the gravity of what they have done with a serious decision to make.

Let us hear the Gospel lesson again.

*“If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. 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.” (Mark 9: 43-48)*

Jesus offers his disciples some of his harshest, most demanding judgments on what believers should do in order to avoid committing such sins. Jesus was probably the most tolerant man who ever lived. However, those are not tolerant words at all. There was one area where Jesus showed no tolerance. It was the area of sin. There were some things about sin Jesus wanted to say to us without compromise. Let’s talk about “sin” for just a few minutes today, even though it is less and less fashionable to do so. There are some things about sin we need to know.

Have you heard of Elm Bark Beetles? They are capable of transmitting Dutch elm disease. The elm bark beetles feed in the thick bark of trunks and limbs. They construct egg tunnels beautifully and geometrically across the wood grain. Beetles emit pheromones to attract other beetles, which are drawn to target trees and may result in heavy pheromone infestation and eventually death of the tree.

This piece of wood is from the church yard and looks just perfect for your fireplace. The tree of this log was not dying because its trunk had decayed or gone rotten, but because the bark of the tree was infected by Dutch Elm Disease. It has killed five trees from our yard so far. Every tree infected by Dutch Elm Disease has to be cut down. Sin is like the very tiny Elm Bark Beetles. It does not look big or great. It does not look like it affects your soul. It looks trivial. It does not look deadly to the core of your faith, but it kills your soul and spirit and you. That's a lesson of the Elm Bark Beetles. That's why Jesus says, "*If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off.*" However, there are people who consider sins casually.

I was reading recently about an insect that is drawn to fire.

*Most creatures flee in panic from fire, but this particular kind of beetle deliberately flies toward forest fires. Its proper name is Melanophila which means "lover of blackness." These beetles lay their eggs on burnt wood that has recently been killed by a forest fire. They can detect fires from as far away as 12 miles by using special infrared sensory organs on their mid-section. They are especially attracted by the wavelengths of infrared light that correspond to the temperature of burning wood. (E-zine: THE LEARNING KINGDOM)*

When I read about these beetles I thought of people in this world who are also "lovers of blackness." They are drawn to wrongdoing in the same way that these beetles are drawn to burning wood. Some people love sin. You and I know that. There are some people for whom the straight life is dull, boring. Avoid these people, friends. At all costs, avoid them. They have no ambition except to bring you down. It may be little and look like nothing to you, but it is deadly and fatal.

Chuck Swindoll writes about a woman. *She went to lunch with eleven other women who were taking a French course together since their children were all in school. One rather bold type asked, "How many of you have been faithful throughout your marriage?" Only one lady raised her hand. That evening one of the ladies related the incident to her husband. When she admitted she was not the one who had raised her hand, her husband looked crestfallen. "But I've been faithful to you," she quickly reassured him. He asked, "Then why didn't you raise your hand?" and she answered. "I was ashamed."* (COME BEFORE WINTER) Ashamed of being faithful? Do you see what's happened to us? Do you see how we've deviated from the standard? Do you see how we've accommodated ourselves to the world and just followed the crowd like Melanophila flying toward forest fires? Of what value is our faith before challenges of sins? If we are ashamed of being faithful, there will be no way to cut off our sins.

Jesus says, "*If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off.*" But can you cut off your foot if it causes you to stumble? No! Then what is a solution?

I asked John Walters what the solution for trees infected by Dutch Elm Disease was. He said, "We can not save infected trees. But to prevent the disease from spreading we take the bark off and to expose the infected bark to air. That kills the beetles." That's another lesson of the Elm Bark Beetles. If you commit a sin, what do you have to do? How can you cut it off? You have to expose your sin to God. To repent of your sin is a way to expose your sin to God, and God cuts the sin off from you and forgives you of the sin, and makes you clean.

I recently received a letter dated on September 22, 2006. The letter says;

*Dear Pastor Kim,*

*Please find enclosed a check as a token of my guilt offering as I ask your forgiveness. Please know that as a young child, I attended Roselle UMC's Sunday School. My family members never were members of your parish, yet we lived across the street. As a young child, I was well cared for and provided for. Why I felt moved to remove money from the Sunday School offering basket, I cannot explain, nor can I tell you how much I stole. Please accept this guilt offering.*

*Why am I doing this you may ask? I am a devout Christian who felt called to the Lord for many years and have been blessed in my relationship with Christ. I am currently studying the book of Leviticus, specially the various offerings God instructed Moses in. As I read these, I was struck with a deep sense of remembrance and guilt as I was in my study of what I had done as a child. I have prayed about this deep sense of guilt and have asked God for forgiveness and am asking for yours. Sincerely and with remorse, I remain, (And he singed his name).*

I wrote a letter of affirmation back to him immediately. I believe he cut off his sin from his past, and made his life straight since he opened his painful past, and exposed it to God. Jesus says, *"If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off."* If there is something going on in your life right now that you would be embarrassed about if the other members of this congregation found out about it, stop! Stop before it is too late. Not because we will judge you- we would never do that. That which you think is covered will be laid bare. That which you think is of little consequence will have an enormous impact like the Elm Bark Beetles. As someone has said, "If you dance with the devil, you always end up with burn marks on your suit." Clean your life now and today. We all are capable of committing sins. However, when you commit sin, you must cut your sin off from you with your repentance. Take an action of repentance today! If you hurt someone's heart, call him today and ask him for forgiveness. If you forget to pay someone, pay him back. If you can not find the person you hurt, ask God for forgiveness. Expose your sin before God like Dutch Elm Disease to air. All God wants from us is a contrite heart. Come to the Lord with open and contrite heart. That's the choice you and I have to make today.