



**Burn the Ships**  
**September 30, 2018**  
**Mark 9:38-50**

Grace and peace to you from God  
Our Father and from our teacher and Lord,  
Jesus Christ, amen.

When a house is put on the market, many real estate agents bring in stagers. These stagers begin their work by clearing the stage. And how do they do this? They walk around your house and point at things — end tables, rugs and vases — and they say, “Edit. Edit. Edit.” What they mean is, “Delete.” Get rid of it. To me, a staged house is just that, a house. It’s not a home. Home is where you feel comfortable with all your stuff surrounding you, but they say when you’re selling your house you have to get rid of all the clutter... I’m actually quite a pack rat. I’ve kept stuff from years ago that I know I’ll never use again, but I find it hard to get rid of certain things. I know I need to purge my unneeded possessions. I’ve already donated most of my books and given away so much of my past. I even finally got rid of those boxes of vinyl LP records that got wet in the “flood of 85,” but were carried around through 5 Air Force

moves from Wisconsin to Arizona to Virginia to Texas, then to Alaska, and finally to their final resting spot here in Ohio. I really struggled to get rid of them, but the water from the basement flood of 1985 and all the years in between left them so badly damaged they could not be restored. So, now I’ve worked on replacing them with digital versions, and my collecting goes on...

I read an article this week about how older people are having to sell or throw away many of their family heir looms because the younger kids and grandchildren don’t want their lives cluttered up with so much stuff. As a result, many older people are having to take their china or antiques to the thrift store or even just leave them on the curb for the trash man to pick up. Think about all the stuff you keep around that mean a lot to you, things that might not be worth a penny, but hold great sentimental value. For example, just because I love alpacas and bananas doesn’t mean I should leave my kids an entire house full of alpaca and banana nick knacks to have to dispose of when I’m gone... What if the stuff you choose to surround yourself with prevents you from growing closer to Christ or is actually harmful to your well-being, either spiritually or physically?

In the gospel of Mark, Jesus challenges us to do a kind of house cleaning by removing from our lives the sinful actions and attitudes that cause us to stumble. In the town of Capernaum, John, says to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not

following us.” John is concerned this unknown exorcist is not properly trained or authorized to use the name of Jesus in his healing work. Instead of being outraged, Jesus says, “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.”

He’s saying to John, delete your concern for purity... Get rid of it. Whoever is not against the way of Jesus is for the way of Jesus. We need this kind of house cleaning today, at a time where so many people are obsessed with purity in religion and even more so in politics. If you caught any of the Kavanaugh hearings conducted by the Senate this week you know what I’m talking about. Some people are so intent on political purity they actually questioned the Supreme Court nominee about the writing in his high school yearbook over 37 years ago. I’m sure glad none of you wanted to look at my high school year book before calling me as your Pastor... Condoleezza Rice, the secretary of state in the George W. Bush administration, hosted a documentary called American Creed, which explores, not just the divisions that exist in our country, but also what still unites us as a Nation. In our culture today, we’re purists about so many things. Whether it’s gay rights or gun rights, or abortion rights, unfortunately we are attacking each other in very personal and destructive ways, especially in social media.

“We all have to start listening to each other,” says Condoleezza Rice. “And right now, we’re shouting at each other instead. Right now, we’re saying my grievance, my narrative, is superior to yours.

I have suffered more. I have been discriminated against more.” Fortunately, Rice found a few Americans who are taking the opposite tack, and are putting aside purity in order to unify their communities. Jesus would approve of this, because he is always looking to unite instead of divide. “Whoever is not against us,” he says, “is for us.”

The call to house cleaning continues when Jesus says, if your hand or your foot, or your eye causes you to stumble, cut it off or gouge it out. It’s better for you to enter life maimed than to remain whole and to go to the unquenchable fire. Jesus is saying that if your hands or feet or eyes trip you up stop using your hands, feet, and eyes in this way. He’s giving us three areas of our lives to start house cleaning. So, what kind of ways might our hands, feet, or eyes might this include? Most of us use our hands to do our jobs — from computer work to construction projects — but some kinds of work are more harmful than helpful. Maybe what we’re doing with our hands, feet, or eyes puts a burden on the poor, harms the environment, scandalizes our families or destroys our well-being. If so, says Jesus, delete it! Get rid of it, and replace it with things that are healthier and more productive. At the same time, most of us use our feet to take us to a variety of places, but there are some places to which we really shouldn’t go, because they are places that do damage to our bodies, our souls and our relationships. Alcoholics are scandalized by bars, gambling addicts are scandalized by casinos and married people can be scandalized by places and situations that

tempt them to be unfaithful. If so, says Jesus, delete them! Use your feet to take you to places that are good for you and for the people you love. We live in a visual culture today, with tantalizing images all around us. Temptations appear on our computer screens, smartphones, televisions and in the pages of glossy magazines. Perhaps our eyes are drawn to designer fashions, luxury cars, social media postings. If these images scandalize you, delete them! Get rid of them. Don’t let the things you see cause you to stumble. In all of these ways, Jesus wants us to do the hard work of house cleaning.

His words are harsh. Cutting off body parts and gouging out eyes. If we literally did what Jesus said, the world would be filled with blind, handless, feetless people... Here’s what I think Jesus meant. This week For King and Country, one of my favorite Christian bands, released a new song that’s coming out on their new album in October. It’s called Burn the Ships. As part of their marketing, I received an email from the band with the story behind the song. It’s about a Spanish explorer who had discovered a new land. He was excited to explore the new territory, but his men were afraid. They wouldn’t get out of the ship and go ashore because they were so terrified of the dangers of this unknown area. The Captain ordered the men off the ship and then gave another order. That order was to burn the ships. By destroying the ships the men had no choice, but to face their fears and step out into the new day. I think that’s what Jesus is saying when he tells us to cut off the hands or feet that lead us astray or to

gouge out our wandering eyes. Once you remove the ship you can’t go back. You can only go forward. Whatever sin is holding you back from being the God pleasing person you know you were made to be—well—burn that ship! Make it so you can never go back to that way of living. Jesus doesn’t stop here, leaving us maimed and alone. He gives us himself to forgive whatever it is we’ve done with our hands, feet, or eyes and then gives us two more gifts. First, he gives us the gift of his holy spirit whose presence within us does the work of cutting out our sinful nature. The Holy Spirit sanctifies us, making us pure and holy. The second gift is Jesus’ presence with us. As we step into the new day, facing a sinful world, leaving all those things we’ve done or left undone behind to face the dangers and perils that lay ahead, we’re not alone. Jesus said, I am with you, even to the end of the age. You see, we don’t have to leave the ship to face the perils of this new land alone. We walk with Jesus Christ who has conquered this world, sin, death, and even the very devil himself.

May we learn from Jesus how to delete and declutter our lives so we can be free to love God and serve our neighbor. May we find ways to eliminate the destructive and negative things we do, places our feet take us, and images we view. May God help us all to burn those ships. Then, may we always use the gifts and talents God has given us in ways that please God and glorify his name. Amen.