

(Re-) Making a Pig of Yourself

"And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell." And besides, you can always grow it back later.

Anecdotal accounts of powdered pig bladder re-growing severed fingers has scientists at Fort Sam Houston fooling around with folk medicine in an effort to help amputees regain lost limbs. Lee Spievack of Cincinnati claims to be a living example of double-digit inflation after applications of the porcine powder reproduced the last segment of his middle dactyl.

Jesus, on a famous occasion, advised the opposite course of action. Our Lord prescribes a literal legerdemain, a "lightening of the hand," achieved by amputation of the offending member. He insists we make a thorough job of it: "throwing" replaces "growing" as the preferred course of action. These diametrically diverse decisions regarding digits provoke a couple of thoughts.

First, while we should be all for healing and wholeness both physical and spiritual, we might do well to ponder whether the two always go together. Jesus once restored a withered hand because the problem was truly corporeal, but he clearly favored a maimed body over a shallow soul. In a world where rich Christians splurge on silicone and spackle their creases with collagen, we might begin to wonder if we've misplaced our priorities. "If thy right hand offend thee, get a manicure" hardly squares with a view of the body as the soul's gymnasium.

Second, we might look a little closer at what Christ truly teaches about spiritual slicing and dicing. Nikolai Gogol wrote a short story about a man whose nose goes AWOL and sets up on its own as a high-ranking member of the Russian bureaucracy. The loss spawns a certain humility in its previously pompous possessor, but when reunited with his nostrils, he resumes his haughty demeanor. Being less corpulent does not mean being less carnal. A right-hand-ectomy will only prove that sin is ambidextrous. Possibly Jesus hints that sanctification never works from the outside in. As G. K. Chesterton's fictional judge Basil Grant once barked to the Prime Minister, "Get a new soul. That thing's not fit for a dog. Get a new soul."

Two lessons: internal beauty may come at the price of outward ugliness, and outward amputations stand impotent to effect inward transformation. Powdered pig is a poor substitute for the Blood of the Lamb.

Handily,
Doug