My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our God of our hearts, minds, spirits, and souls, God of our dreams and hopes and possibilities for justice, peace, compassion, and mercy, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

The middle part of this passage reads like the visual of a horror movie, doesn’t it? Hanging rocks around your neck and drowned, cutting off hands and feet, eyes plucked out, and talk of the fires of hell. Jesus really lets his disciples know where they stand if, or rather when, they go against persons who are innocent, defenseless, reliant on us for very lives and character. Rather than let the disciples struggle with a parable, he sets out a metaphor in the strongest possible terms. No doubt God doesn’t approve of this kind of behavior. Big time.

I’ll bet if we went through our library of favorite bible passages, this one doesn’t make the top 10. Or 50. Or maybe even 100. The language is too graphic and gross, all this talk of mutilating ourselves if we screw up. It doesn’t sound like Jesus at all. Is this what love is?

I can tell you this much. For the folks who say they take the bible literally, they do not participate in this one. And it’s one of the things that folks who don’t know that much about the Bible look at and say, “I’m not going there.” And they throw the rest of the Bible under the bus as a result. This passage is trouble if we look at it simplistically and out of context.

But we know better, right? God’s bigger than that. JC is leaving his homeland here, heading to Jerusalem to die. So he’s continuing on his leadership series with the disciples where he took a little child on his lap to let them know how fragile people, and their faith, are, particularly the ones who are underprivileged, poor, brokenhearted, and disinherited. The children who have nothing are the foil of this leadership series for behavior and mentorship.

“Here’s what’s good for you…” JC says, four times. And he describes the awfulness of ignoring God’s advice. Better to not live at all than do that. Better they cripple themselves than do that. Better to limp than do that. Better to be truly blind than do that. Following God is hard, and we heard a couple of weeks ago how a bunch of disciples fell away after hearing the hard teachings of union with God through communion. God’s response is to again up the ante.

Disciples don’t get time off. They can’t take a break and let loose at the bar. They aren’t given permission to run off and pick up a one-night stand while the others are sleeping. They cannot degrade or denigrate those who are seeking teaching and healing. The temptations of life often hurt those who Jesus refers to as children—the defenseless, the disinherited, the brokenhearted.

Housekeepers who are never seen and underpaid for their work. Watch the Netflix show “Maid” and it’ll break your heart. Drug-addicted persons who cannot hold a job and are forced to earn money any way they can, often victims of human trafficking. Service workers who just want a fair wage to wait tables or work the counter but are stiffed by those who are offended by suggesting tips because minimum wage laws don’t apply to them.

In this world which challenges us, just as it did those original disciples, here’s the deal: stuff matters. What we do or say has consequences. So are we agents of the Good News or just appearing here on Sunday to make us feel good without an actual change of heart? For people we encounter, we are called to matter. We have power we don’t even know about, but if because of what we say or do people lose faith, question God, pull away from the Light of the World—well, then, let’s put on the millstone.

But this passage is a promise, not a threat. It reminds us that we are full of God’s promise and power, and Jesus asks us to consider this seriously in minds, our hearts, our souls, and our spirits. We pray this each week, right? The Spirit world is real, more so than the physical one with which we are pre-occupied.

Maybe that’s the problem with this passage, the image of physical disability we can’t imagine, because we value our wholeness, walking, talking, hearing, touching.

JC would concede this point. But what Jesus is saying is we have souls that are just as complete and beautiful as our bodies, and its wholeness should come first. Because if our souls are sick, we’re sick all over and our physical traits don’t matter much at all at that point.

So we gross out about cutting off our out body parts, but why not the same reaction to cutting off our justice, our mercy, our kindness, our compassion? Why aren’t we as careful with our souls as we are with our bodies? Why do we go out of our way to hurt others so we get our own way, salve our own comfort, at the expense of others? What we say counts; it matters; JC tells us that we are to build people up, not tear them down.

We will stumble. Talk one way and act another. Talking about how we’re all God’s children and then treating some like strangers or even criminals. Talk about having God’s gifts but hoarding them, refusing to share them and ourselves with others. Talk about God’s grace but then saving up our grudges and whispering them to others so that we tear others down.

But others notice. And it’s the #1 reason folks don’t come to church, because Christians seem hypocritical. They can’t see any difference between churchgoers and non-churchers, except the second group doesn’t pretend to be holier-than-thou. Funny how church is for sinners but then we’re blind with the log in our eye, huh?

Let me leave you with these final thoughts.

We’re God’s baptized and chosen ones, too. If there is anyone who can see the world for what it is and what we can do with and for people body and soul, it’s us. We know intuitively there’s more to the story. God’s bigger than that. We see wholeness even when folks are broken by life’s messiness. And without wholeness, we see and feel the hurt, as if it’s us, too.

Don’t feel that? Let’s talk.

But if we feel like this, we can’t participate in denying dignity of others anymore. Labeling people as animals, criminals, illegal as if their status as children of God fleeing for their lives never enters into the picture. We do this because wounding the soul of another feels like chopping off pieces of our own spirits, and God cries for us both. Such an existence is a wasted one. And wasting is hell, right here, right now, not the Kingdom of God that we so long for and are trying to build.

So let’s use our beautiful eyes, delicate hands, steady feet, and our unbowed necks to carry us into a deep, new strength. Thanks be to God, Amen.