I have a horrid memory of school sports, and in particular, obstacle courses. These were usually setup in the gym and involved ropes dropped from a tall roof, vaulting horses as high as small mountains, and often involved a jumping task from a wobbly bench to an old trampoline distantly located followed by a somersault gyrations landing on a slippery mat. As I remember it, such courses were a recipe for personal trauma and costly lawsuits.

Somehow they were supposed to teach us about physical life. As the name mentions, they were to help us navigate obstacles, including our own personal fears and perceived limits. The effect in my case rather ineffective. The daredevils among us however thrived, smiled and conquered. They now pastor rival churches.

On other occasions, I have looked for help in navigating life’s challenges, and to this end have turned to the internet. The other day I discovered a LAY PERSONS 10 COMMANDMENTS three of which I want to share with you today. See what you think; give me a thumbs UP or thumbs DOWN as you see fit:

• Prayer is not a "spare wheel" that you pull out when in trouble, but it is a "steering wheel" that directs the right path throughout our journey. So steer around obstacles.

• So why is a car's windshield so large and the rear view mirror so small? It’s because our past is not as important as our future, so, look ahead and move on. Obstacles must be faced.
Live simply, love generously, care deeply, speak kindly, and leave the rest to God. Obstacles are surmountable - If we rely on our God-given gifts, everyone wins – seek reconciliation.

MICAH - What God Requires

“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

JUSTICE, KINDNESS, HUMILITY embodied in Jesus Christ

GOSPEL MARK – warnings about obstacles

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. 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.
It’s brutal language, more commonly found in Matthew than in Mark. It’s position in the Gospel itself is significant, for in just a few verses we hear from Jesus that he is moving toward Jerusalem, and horrible things will happen there, but love will prevail.

Sacrificial living is for Jesus the only integral way forward. Obstacles will prevent our passage along a right pathway. Clearly, if all of the above sacrifices apply to any one of us, we will have no body left to support God’s presence in us in this world. When was the last time you tried to move through life lacking hands, feet and eyes. For a few, this is a reality – I think of persons injured in war or other violence, or persons with complex physical and emotional challenges. For most however, our physical challenges are more easily managed.

Jesus here uses the shock treatment to counsel us in faith priorities and provides instruction in discipleship. So we are warned: deal with obstacles which draw us away from faith. I have asked a number of folks in recent days what their spiritual obstacles have been. One person said Grief; another vocational crisis; another greed; another inherited trauma. If I could sum all these up I might do so with a single word: Fear.

Fear is so disabling, so overwhelming. Yet so many of us deal with it, even daily. We can easily understand the fear which drives Syrian refugees to the hope of new life in Northern Europe. We can possibly understand the post-traumatic stress experience by Canadian military women and men returning from Afghanistan. We are less understanding, and I think more impatient with our own local fears. Yet they are real, and can become obstacles. And for thee millstones to move, we need each other and God’s healing.
The good and great news is that we can disempower fear, not by ignoring it but by moving through it. Through the gift of community, or through new discipline we can make better decisions about what we will do or how we shall live. Such choices are commonly called twelfth-step intentions. Find peace in God, and share this same peace and freedom with others.

In our baptismal promise we commit ourselves to reject “all sinful desires that draw us from the love of God” And we respond: “we renounce them.” We used to say “I will with God’s help” but that’s hedging our bets and refusing responsibility. We are called to reject and jettison those things which are in fact obstacles to Godly faith and to enjoin the same in others.

So what’s the outcome of all this spiritual refurbishment? Returning to Mark’s Gospel:

For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.

Ever had popcorn without salt. Not fun. Ever wanted to freshen up a meal, or preserve something for a long time. Salt in appropriate amounts is a healthy and satisfying food seasoning.

Dealing with obstacles is possible and practical. Obstacles distract from those things meant to enrich our lives socially and environmentally. Obstacles come in all shapes and sizes. All involve elements of self-awareness. All are difficult, because if they moved easily, we would have already pushed them out of the way. We’re in this together, so let’s encourage one another as we move through life’s very own obstacle course.