

Sermon Text: Mark 9:38-50
Date: October 1, 2006 (Pentecost 17)
Location: Zion Lutheran Church- North Battleford, SK.
Preacher: Rev. Sheldon Gattinger

Grace and Peace be unto you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched." Everyone will be salted with fire. (Mark 9:43-48)

Wow...for those of you present this morning who like it when their pastor preaches on hell, fire and brimstone- today is your lucky day! For the rest of us who get a little scarred and uncomfortable when they hear these challenging words of Christ, well let us try and work through them and make some sense out of all of this.

Today's gospel reading starts out interestingly enough. The disciples are complaining because they saw someone casting out demons using the name of Christ. We are told that the disciples found this to be highly inappropriate, and ordered the healer to stop. Of course, the disciples were quite proud of themselves for putting an end to this.

"We tried to prevent him because he was not following us." (Mk 9:38) The disciples proudly proclaim to Jesus.

Before we get to the "meat" of this story, we should spend a moment awed by what crime this "interloper" was doing; he was using Christ's name to cast out demons. That was something even the disciples had problems accomplishing [see Luke 17:14-21]. This is an important study about one of the greatest faults of Christ's followers throughout history (including us). What is that fault? The Twelve thought that simply hanging out with Jesus was enough to claim they were his disciples. Then they attacked someone who was outside of their clique but actually doing the work that they should have been doing. This sounds strangely familiar in all too many churches today.

Instead of praising the work of this "outsider" or asking Jesus how they could support this man, they were trying to figure out how to stop him.

"These little ones who believe to stumble..." (Mk 9:42)

In this reading, Jesus lists four types of sin that are horrifying in consequence. One might even see them as the four paths to hell. In each case Jesus suggests that death or mutilation is a better alternative than continuing in these sins- how graphic is that?. His purpose is to show his followers (these are not Pharisees he is speaking to) that this life is nothing compared to the next and that there are no illicit "indulgences" in this life that are worth a moment's joy in God's embrace. A small sin never leads to a lesser sin and toying with sin is like tinkering with an atom splitter. You never know when the chain reaction will cause total destruction.

In this reading, we learn that the four paths that Christ reviles are (outline excerpted from J.Goebel):

1. The path of manipulation;

Here is the path of leading someone into sin by example or intent; but it is also the sin using someone who is vulnerable for personal pleasure or gain. This could be the sin of a father seeking his own pleasures over his family responsibilities or the exploitation of the powerless by the powerful.

You will see that all of these sins can be corporate (as a group) or individual and neither type absolves us from our responsibility. I am just as guilty for a system of injustice from which I benefit as if I was personally stalking the vulnerable. For example, the man who views pornography is as guilty as the man who takes the photographs.

2. The path of the hands;

As with all sin, evil can be as much a result of what we do as what we omit doing. The sins of the hands, feet, and eyes can be as much what we do with what God has given us as what we don't do with our abilities.

The sin of our hands is not just theft or violence; it is also idleness. If I see what needs to be done and do not use my abilities to further God's justice in the midst of injustice - then I have sinned. I am convinced that more of us actually omit the solution than commit the crime. Yet, sin is still sin whether by omission or commission.

3. The path of the feet;

Once again, sin should not just be viewed as where our feet lead us but also by our refusal to go where our Lord calls us. And we mustn't linger, thinking the Lord is going to call us to some great future purpose. If we claim Jesus as our Lord and there is any suffering around us then we have already been called! We have already been told our responsibilities in these matters repeatedly in both the Old and New Testament.

Micah—in his statement typifying the call of God's People [Micah 6:8]—begins with the words; "You know, oh man, what the Lord requires of you..."

In Hebrew, that is the same as saying; "You already know what you are supposed to do, now do it!" "Justice, just do it. Kindness, love it as if it were life itself and humbly accompany God to where he would go." To embrace the poor is not "to do something to them," but make them feel "not forgotten," and "not rejected," by being with them. Jesus rarely preached to sinners, he was far more likely to party with them. His preaching was in response to the attacks of the religious on the rejected. It was enough to Jesus to be present to sinners; he didn't need to do anything to them.

It is our feet that take us down the path to sin and those same feet that won't take us to the front line of Justice. However, if we would spend more time walking towards the latter; we would have a lot less difficulty walking away from the former.

4. The path of the eyes.

The eyes often sin by what they decide to linger upon. What are the lingering habits of my eyes? Do they linger on the weaknesses of others or covet an impure passion for things or people?

Similarly, the heart often sins by what it refuses to see. That was the sin of the rich man (Dives) against Lazarus. Dives didn't kick Lazarus; he didn't hit him, verbally abuse him or even send his dogs after him. Dives ignored Lazarus; even as the dogs licked his wounds, even as he lay dying on Dives front gate.

It was the sin of the unseeing heart, of choosing not to see the suffering, right on as his doorstep, which condemned Dives to a forever without God (hell) [Luke 16:19-31].

All sin can be an act of commission (committing sin) or omission (seeing what should be done but turning away from our responsibility). These are the paths of sin that Jesus tells us to avoid at any cost.

So what are we to do? Cut off our hands? Cut off our legs? Pluck out our eyes? Save ourselves the pain and give up?

No, of course not. But Christ is calling us to be aware of the things that can cause us to stumble- the things that can pull us away from God.

As the Old Testament constantly reminds us, ours is a jealous God. he is jealous for us. God wants all of us. He wants our hands. He wants our feet. He wants our eyes. And most of all, God wants our hearts.

In fact, God loves us so much so that he came into our world to be with us, to teach us, to suffer for us, to die for us, to redeem us. And through all of this, God saw to it that because he lives, we too should live. It is because of God's sacrificing grace that we are not cast away into the unquenchable fires of hell because of the actions of our hands, feet and eyes.

Thanks be to God for that miracle! Amen.