

## Luke 17:1-10

Here in our text, Jesus sounds like the big boss in a crime family. He speaks of millstones around the necks of those who are cast into the sea. This is pretty heavy stuff...(pun intended). It's not what we expect from the mouth of Him who cradled little children in His arms. But I suppose even the mafia bosses have families with children very dear to them. And if someone were to mess with the little ones of a mafia boss, he would probably find himself cast into the sea, or perhaps the East River, with something heavy attached to him. And this is kind of what Jesus is saying. "If you mess with My little ones, there's a millstone waiting for your neck!"

This threat is not for those evil people out there who bring guns into schools intent on killing children. It's not for those who bring terror into shopping malls killing young and old with bombs. It's not for those who sell illegal drugs to children, nor is it for those who murder babies in abortion centers. "Why not?" we ask, "They're harming little ones, even destroying them!" Right in the middle of this discussion about millstones and little ones, Jesus says this pointed phrase: "*Pay attention to yourselves!*" Stop looking at what everyone else is doing to deserve a millstone, and start looking at yourself. What are you doing, or not doing, that brings harm to Jesus' little ones?

He is not speaking only of children here. "Little ones" are any, young or old, who are little in the faith; not mature, but immature; still needing the milk of the Word, not ready for solid food. He is not speaking of little ones in general, but of little ones within the church; those who have faith; who have a place in God's family. Jesus' harsh words here about millstones around the neck are for those who cause these little ones to sin so that their faith is destroyed. Far better to harm and destroy the dear child of a mafia boss than to harm one of Jesus' little ones. "*Better,*" He says, "*to be cast into the sea with a millstone around the neck.*"

These harsh words of our Lord are driven by love. He loves His dear children so much that He threatens anyone who would take His little ones away from Him. He loves you so much that the thought of losing you is too much to bear. You are the object of Jesus' love. He poured out His life's blood for you. And He poured it out also for those precious souls whom you and I may be harming. "Who, me?" we ask. Yes, us. By what we do, and fail to do, we are the very ones Jesus is speaking of when He talks about millstones around the neck.

Here is how He puts it: "*If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.*" You and I are charged by our Lord to draw our brother's attention to his sin and to forgive him when he repents. This is something so serious that if we fail to do what Jesus commands, we are committing soul-murder. Our brother's spiritual and eternal life is at stake.

Here we must consider our station and ask ourselves...Am I a parent or a guardian? *Do I properly correct my children when they sin, or am I afraid that they will not like me if I discipline them? Do I forgive my children when they repent?* Am I a member of Christ's body, the church? *Do I show love to a brother or sister in Christ, who is being carried along in their sin, by drawing their attention to it? Or do I say nothing because I don't want to upset them?* What we do, or fail to do, for Jesus' little ones is so vital that we can actually close the door into heaven to them by disregarding Jesus' command.

There isn't one of us here, myself included, who can say, "Jesus is not speaking to me about millstones around the neck...I always rebuke my brother when he sins, as I should." We all fail, everyone of us. And we also fail to forgive our brother when he repents; especially when our brother sinned against us or against our loved one. When we fail to forgive our repentant brother or sister in Christ, we are destroying their faith. If they perish, we are the ones who are responsible. Where's that millstone? It's around your neck, and around mine. There isn't one of us who doesn't deserve it.

Jesus speaks these words so that we repent, not so that we get all defensive and blame others. He speaks these words so that we cry with the Apostles, "*Lord, increase our faith!*" "I don't have it within me to rebuke and to forgive. Help me Lord! Have mercy on me, and let me be Your humble servant who does what You have commanded."

Friend, I have good news for you. That millstone, big and heavy as it is, can only fit around one neck; and that neck is not yours, it's Jesus'. See Him dying on the cross for you. There around His neck is the millstone you and I deserve. He did not deserve it. But this is why He came from heaven, to be cast into the sea of fire and brimstone wearing the millstone of our guilt and punishment around His neck.

God completely forgives you...everyone of you. Whatever harm you and I have done to His little ones; whatever faith we have harmed, and even destroyed, in the hearts of ones precious to Him, God forgives you. The millstone we deserved was not only worn by Jesus for you; that millstone was crushed to pieces. On the Third Day, that stone was shattered as He burst out of His tomb. God is not angry at you. He has no harsh words for you. Instead, He does what you ask. He increases your faith by giving you more and more of Jesus. In Word and in Sacrament, God puts Christ into your heart, and you are able to live as His servants.

Be comforted. Rather than putting a millstone around your neck, God puts the cross upon your heart. He did this in your Baptism. He cast you into those sacred waters so that you need not fear being cast into the sea forever. You are God's servants. He rebukes you with His Law, and so you know how to rebuke others when they sin. But most of all, God forgives you, dear repentant sinner, and so you will forgive those little ones in your life.

The road to heaven is one of rebuke and forgiveness. We are all sinners, and so we all need rebuking along the way. And we are all sinners for whom Christ died. And so we need forgiveness every step of the way. Without the rebuke of the Law, no one can make it to heaven. And without God's forgiveness in Christ, no one can make it to heaven. "*Rebuke...and forgive,*" says Jesus. None of us is above needing rebuke. And all of us need forgiveness. And forgiveness you are given. Come now, dear little ones in Christ, and precious to Him. Here at His Table, the rebuking is gone. Here in His Sacrament, you have forgiveness in full measure. For here is Christ who cradles you in His arms. Amen.