

“*They picked up stones to throw at (Jesus).*” They did this here in our text and again in John chapter 10. These were attempted stonings. The Apostle Paul they actually did stone. And Stephen also, and he died from being stoned.

It’s simply too easy for people to pick up a stone and throw it. They obviously need more stone control laws. But then, of course, stones don’t throw themselves. The problem is not with stones but with people. Even would they have been able to remove all the stones from around Jerusalem, people would still find a way to kill. With Jesus, they used a tree, a cross. Should they remove all the trees too?

The Jews actually did have stone control laws on their books. God put them there. But not with regard to the stones on the ground, but the stones contained in the heart. Laws against unbelief; against stubbornly harboring a heart of stone against God.

We see such stony hearts in our text. The Jews here are arguing with Jesus. Twice they tell Him that He has a demon. How absolutely ludicrous! The One who came to destroy the devil is Himself possessed by a devil? This is not just unbelief, it’s demonic unbelief. It’s not just simply ignoring Jesus as is so common today. It’s engaging in warfare against Jesus. It’s holding fast to a lie which they know to be a lie. Calling evil good, and good evil.

It’s refreshing for us to see such unbelief in these Jews, isn’t it? Because we can feel better about ourselves that we are not like them. Not only do we not throw stones, we do not have hearts that are as hard as stone.

But this is not to our credit. God, in mercy, acted to remove the stone from our hearts in our baptism. We did have the devil there, but now we have Christ. We were born with unbelieving hearts, but now we believe.

Yet, we still have doubts. Doubts that contain pebbles of unbelief. Pebbles that would grow into stones except that God, in mercy, continues to bring you here where Christ Jesus, in Word and Sacrament, crushes those little stones within your hearts.

Now in our text the stones in their hearts caused them to pick up stones to throw at Jesus when He said these words, “*Before Abraham was, I am.*” These words were unacceptable to them. He was claiming to be the one and only God. The God who created all things; who spoke to Moses through the burning bush; who delivered His people from Pharaoh, and the God who would redeem all people from the evil foe. Stony hearts or not, that’s a lot for anyone to accept. Maybe even for us.

A few minutes ago, you and I confessed something that is a lot to accept. The longest creed in the book – the Athanasian Creed. Did you comprehend all of that? Did it make sense to you? Are you ready to be quizzed on all those big words in the creed? More likely you’re glad that Trinity Sunday only comes once a year. And very grateful that reciting the Athanasian Creed, word for word, is not a requirement to enter into heaven.

Yet believing it is. Believing what the creed confesses is required. And here's why. To believe what the creed teaches is to believe that before Abraham was, Jesus is. To believe what the creed teaches is to believe the truth of who God is, who you are, and what He has done to rescue you from eternal damnation.

Maybe we should confess this creed every Sunday. And actually, we do. For when the truth about sin and grace is here proclaimed, the truth of God's Word, Jesus Christ, confessed by the creed, is being used by the Holy Spirit to crush the pebbles of unbelief within our hearts.

And here is something else for you to believe. The baptized child of God, tiny as that baby may be, believes what is confessed in the Athanasian Creed. Perhaps the only words that tiny baby can say are, "Goo Goo Gaa Gaa." Yet because God's miracle of baptism is so powerful, that baby, within its heart, believes that before Abraham was, Jesus is.

To believe this, to believe what Jesus says about Himself is to never see death, eternal death. Jesus says this in our text. The Jews mocked Him for saying this. What about you? You don't mock Him, but do you keep His words in your heart? This is essential. Jesus here says, "*If anyone keeps My words, he will never see death.*" He places His words in your ears here to be kept in your hearts.

And more than just keeping them there in your heart. The Greek word here in our text means more than to keep; it means to guard. You might keep a nickel, but you guard a one-hundred-dollar bill. We don't guard what is of little value to us. What are Jesus' words to you? Do we hear them once a week in church but fail to guard them in our hearts the rest of the week? I'm guilty of this. Are you?

To close our Divine Service today, you will hear the words of the benediction. "*The Lord bless you and keep you...*" What are you to Jesus? What does it mean that He keeps you? Does He just kind of hang on to you somewhat? Keeping you like that? Or does He guard you because you are so precious to Him?

You know He does. He gave Himself up for you on the cross. There is no one and nothing more precious to Him than you. He guards you, and even when you fail to guard His words. For that, He forgives you. For everything, He forgives you. And of this you can be absolutely certain.

My friend, Jesus has been guarding you ever since you were baptized, and even before that. He who was before Abraham, was before you. And you rejoice, as did Abraham, to see His day. Amen.