

**Luke 17:1-10**

To be thrown into the sea is one thing. There is a chance, at least, of being rescued or swimming to the shore; not a good chance, but a chance. But to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around your neck—it's over. You're not going to make it. You will sink and drown in the depths.

We really would not want to wish this fate on anyone, would we? It would be a horrible way to die. Who would even think of such an awful thing! Actually...Jesus did, and He speaks of it in our text: "It would be better," He says, "for someone to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck, than for that person to cause one of these little ones to sin."

There are certain times when we heartily agree with Him. It would have been better perhaps we think, that Michael Devlin should have drowned in the sea with such a millstone, than for him to have abused Sean Hornbeck and Ben Ownby. And why didn't Seung-Hui Cho shoot himself first before he shot and killed 32 students and professors at Virginia Tech University in April? That millstone would have been a great place to put his head. So we would agree with Jesus in principle: If someone is going to perish anyway, it would be better for him to perish without taking others with him. Jesus, however, doesn't put it like that. Whether I'm perishing or not, He says that if I cause someone else to sin, it would be better that I drown with a millstone around my neck than for me to do such a thing.

And here I think I can understand a little of how Noah felt when he was on the ark. "Why am I being rescued, while they all are drowning?" Because I can't even count all the times when I have caused others to sin. If anyone deserves to perish with a millstone around his neck, it's me. We all deserve that fate. Whether we have children or work with them, or whether we don't; "little ones" means anyone who is "little" in the faith; those who are weak and need to be strengthened and nourished—and we never know who they are. They're all around us, observing us, learning from our example.

And we lead them into sin by our complaining, our angry words, our stubbornness, our pride, our unwillingness to repent; by our lack of respect for authority, our flippant misuse of God's Name, our neglect of His Word and Sacraments; by our refusals to show love to others, to help those in need, to witness to those who do not know Christ. Need I go on? There aren't enough millstones to go around, because we all deserve one; because in so many ways, by our poor example, we cause others to sin; we lead them away from Christ, away from eternal life. "Lord," we cry with the disciples, "Increase our faith!"

Oh, but there's more. "If your brother sins," says Jesus, "rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in one day and seven times comes back to you and says 'I repent,' forgive him." But what do we do? If our brother in the faith sins, we do one of two things—either we draw everyone's attention to it to make ourselves look better—"Look what he did...I'm not as sinful as he is!"...or, we say nothing. We fail to rebuke him. We let it slide and look the other way. We may be afraid of losing his friendship or his business. We may be fearful of what he will say to us in response, or of what he may say to others about us. We're not in the habit of obeying Jesus' words and

rebuking our brother when he sins; and so our brother continues in sin, is overcome by his sin, becomes hardened in his sin, and may well end up perishing in sin.

But, we are in the habit of going ballistic when our brother sins against “me!” And rather than obey Jesus’ words to forgive him, we hold his sins against him and carry around a grudge in our heart. Seven times...huh...we don’t even forgive one time! Instead, we get angry with him when he sins against us so that, not only is he deprived of forgiveness, we are as well—because if I refuse to forgive another, I am showing Jesus that I don’t believe He has forgiven me. “Lord,” we cry with the disciples, “Increase our faith!”

If you and I are anything like those disciples then we’re feeling pretty guilty right now. Upon hearing Jesus’ words, they saw how utterly weak and sinful they were. If there was any help and hope for them, it must come not from within them—for they were spiritual failures—but from outside of them. They did not say: Well, then, I must do better; I must try harder to forgive; I must try harder to avoid leading others into sin; and I must work on rebuking others properly when they sin. No such words came from their lips. Rather, they knew they were inadequate. They could not do what Jesus commanded. They needed His total and complete help. “Lord,” they cried in despair, “Increase our faith!”

“If you have faith as small as a mustard seed...” Jesus said in response. It’s not the size of your faith—it’s having faith in the right thing. Too often we even have faith in our faith. In times of trouble, we don’t look to Christ in His Word and Sacraments, but we look to the fact that we have faith. And yet, faith never looks to itself; it always looks to Christ. The disciples despaired when looking within their own hearts at their faith. They had to look outside themselves to Christ for help. If you look to Christ and His Word, then you never have to worry about your faith; you will never have to wonder if your faith will pull you through a tough time. It’s Christ who pulls you through. It’s Jesus who saves you. A drowning person looks, not within himself for help, but to the lifeguard. Later, on the shore, that person would not say, “It was my faith in the lifeguard that saved me,” but he would simply say, “It was the lifeguard who rescued me.”

And Jesus has rescued you by pulling you out of the depths of your sins, even though it drowned Him in the process. He refused to allow that millstone to hang around your neck, even though you and I deserve it, and so He humbly bowed His head while they fastened that thorny millstone on His head—and Jesus was then thrown into the sea of God’s punishment. He sank down into the depths for you. He went all the way down into hell in your place. He suffered for your sins; for your poor example; for your refusals to rebuke an erring brother; for your refusal to forgive another. And He died with that millstone around His neck so that you need not die on account of your sins, so that you, right now, are declared forgiven.

And on the third day that millstone was thrown from the entrance of His tomb. And it is gone. It will never come near your neck. Jesus’ resurrection blew it away for you, and you are free—free of all charges; free in God’s eyes to live as His forgiven child; free to enjoy His blessings in Christ—His favor, peace with God, and the hope of eternal life in Jesus Christ.

Jesus speaks of a servant in our text who is simply called to do his duty. And that servant is Christ. Jesus is your Suffering Servant. He doesn’t deserve your millstone, but He takes

it. He didn't commit your sins, but He dies for them; not to shame you, but to forgive you. Whether you feel forgiven or not, you are forgiven of your sins. Whether you leave here today believing God has sent His Son to rescue you or not, Jesus is your Savior, and He saves you through His Word of Life coming into your ears.

He doesn't check first to see if you are living right, if you are setting a good example, if you are forgiving others, or even if you're sorry. Through His Word He brings you to repentance, and by His mercy He pardons all the wrong things you have done.

And then this Jesus lives in you so that, through you, He will rebuke your erring brother; through you, Jesus will forgive those who sin against you; and through you, Jesus will lead others, not into sin, but into His Word of Grace and Forgiveness.

Jesus has saved you, my friend. And perhaps now we can understand a little of how Noah felt when he walked again on the dry ground. "Since it's by the grace of God that I stand here, rescued from the depths, then in His grace I will stand and live my life." Amen.