

Mark 9:38-50

As I look around here in church today, it is apparent that either we are living lives free from sin, or we don't take seriously these words of Jesus. None of us seem to be missing any body parts. Our hands, feet, and eyes are all intact. We haven't taken our Lord's words literally to cut off that member which causes us to sin. And well we shouldn't. The road to heaven may be paved with blood, but it's the blood of the saints martyred for the Faith, not the blood of Christians practicing self-mutilation.

There are those, however, who will disagree. And we don't have to look far. Our church is named after Martin Luther, that humble confessor of the truth. But in his early years as a monk, Luther, as was the custom of the day, used to beat his body into submission. Physical abuse to one's body was seen as a way to keep oneself from heading into sin, and to punish oneself for sinful desires.

But Jesus is not telling us, in our text, to physically cut out our eyes, as if blindness will keep evil thoughts from entering our mind. And He is not telling us to physically cut off our hands and feet, as if the crippled and maimed have a better chance of making it to heaven. So what is Jesus teaching us here? He wants us to consider the bigger picture. If you have an apple that has some dark spots on the surface, you may find that as you cut them out you have to take your knife deeper and deeper, because the dark spots on the outside are there only because the core is rotten on the inside.

And that is true of us. If your eye is tempted to look at that which is wrong and sinful, cutting it out will not solve the problem because, "out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, and fornications." And it is not your hands and feet that lead you into sin, but, "from the heart come thefts, murders, and wickedness." Our hands, feet, and eyes may be darkened with sin, but it is our heart that is rotten to the core. And so if you're going to cut something out to prevent yourself from entering into sin, cut out your heart. And that is the bigger picture.

Now having said that, let me remind you that the church is not a club or gym where we come to work on ourselves. The church is a hospital and you are here for surgery. "God's Word," says the writer to the Hebrews, "is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword." Christ is the surgeon. We are the patients. And we are here, not to learn how to improve our lives, but for our Lord to expose our wicked hearts, and to create "a clean heart within us."

Even though Jesus says, "cut off," in our text, it is really He who does the cutting. No patient can operate on his own heart, and neither can we cut away the wickedness of our hearts. David cried, "Create in me a clean heart, O God!" And that is our cry. As we heard today, in the Confession of Sins we stand with our first parents in the Garden, and seeing our sinful heart exposed by the Word of God, we can do nothing other than cry out to God for mercy. For when we ask our Divine Surgeon, "How serious is our condition?" We hear, "It is of the worst kind!" Our disease is fatal. The prognosis is death—eternal separation from God.

We need to remember what Jesus says in our text: "Whoever causes one of these little ones to sin, it would be better that he be thrown into the sea with a large millstone around his

neck.” And who of us has not done this! Not one of us is innocent. Whether we’re parents or not; whether we work with children or not, we have all caused little ones to sin.

By our poor example...teaching them that it’s okay to break the Third Commandment and despise the preaching of God’s Word. Teaching them that it’s okay to break the Second Commandment and speak God’s Name in vain. Teaching them that it’s okay to break the Eighth Commandment and listen to gossip about our neighbor...and the First Commandment...teaching those who are “little” in the faith that Jesus and His Kingdom do not always come first. We deserve to be thrown into the sea of eternal separation from God with a millstone around our head, because by our words and actions we cause little ones to sin. And this is because our hearts are rotten to the core.

But listen to this good news! You will not be thrown into the sea, but rather you have been thrown into the forgiving waters of Holy Baptism. You and I deserve to be tossed into the depths and drowned with our sins, but because God is merciful, He drowned your sins in Baptism’s waters, and He raised you up with Christ there. The sea may be a watery grave and a frightening thing to behold, and so look to your baptism and see there the love of God for you. Those waters are not frightening—they are comforting, for they have given you life instead of death, forgiveness instead of punishment, heaven instead of hell.

Your baptism shows you and gives you what Jesus did for you. At the cross He took that millstone off your head and He accepted a crown of thorns upon His own head for you. At the cross He was buried beneath the load of our sins so that you would forever be free of that awful load. At the cross they put a spear into the heart of your Lord so that in your baptism, He replaces your wicked heart with His own clean, holy heart that He freely gives you. At the cross Jesus closed His eyes in death for you, so that you are forgiven for all the sinful things you look upon with your eyes. At the cross Jesus’ hands and feet were pierced with nails for you, so that whatever wickedness your hands and feet have done, God, for Jesus’ sake, forgives you for everything.

You and I may have caused many little ones to sin, but God looks upon you with compassion. Our hearts may be sinful, but His heart is full of pardon for you. And because He has washed your eyes, hands, and feet in the waters of baptism, He now uses these members of your body, not to lead children into sin, but to lead them to Christ. For when your hands open the Scriptures for a little child, it is Christ using your hands. And when your feet walk with a child to God’s House, it is Christ using your feet. And when a child sees your eyes closed in prayer, it is Christ who is teaching him to pray through you.

Will our eyes, hands, and feet be perfect in what they do—in how they are used by Christ? No, for we are always tempted to use them for what is wicked, and because we are weak, we often give in to what tempts us. Dear friend, don’t ever think that you are not God’s forgiven child because of your failings; because of the sinful things that you reach for, and walk toward, and look at. You are a baptized Christian. God declares you forgiven for Jesus’ sake. Heaven is yours in Him. No matter how rotten our hearts may be, God sees only a clean heart within you. Always remember the bigger picture that God sees—it is not your heart, but Christ’s heart, that God sees. It is not what your hands and feet do, but that Christ’s hands and feet were pierced for you.

This is good news for you. It is the truth of God for you in Christ Jesus. It gives us joy in our worship. It shapes our lives throughout each week, for it allows us to live in peace and confidence before God. Amen.