

John 8:48-59

After hearing today's text, we might wonder if there were any bills coming before the Jewish high council concerning "stone control laws." There were just too many stones around Jerusalem, and people were using them to hurt and kill other people. Jesus faced such a threat in our text. After His conversation with the Jews, they picked up stones to throw at Him. Maybe if they had more and stricter stone control laws on the books, incidents like this would not take place. But of course stones don't kill; people do. They missed Jesus this time, but later on they nailed Him to a cross.

Our story for today in John 8 really needs to be looked at with John 4 in the background. In John 4 Jesus has a conversation with a woman at a well. In some ways the two stories are very similar. But their endings are complete opposites. To both the woman at the well, and to the Jews in John 8, Jesus speaks about giving eternal life. They both question Him about this. The woman asks, "*Are you greater than our father Jacob?*" In John 8 the Jews ask, "*Are you greater than our father Abraham?*" And to both Jesus reveals His divinity. "*I am (the Messiah),*" He tells the woman. "*Before Abraham was, I am,*" He tells the Jews. But this is where the similarities end. For now we see the woman going into her village and telling the townspeople she has found the Christ. Many, it says, believed in Jesus because this woman testified about Him. And they begged Him to stay with them. But in John 8 you know what happened. The Jews picked up stones to throw at Jesus.

Are we surprised? We shouldn't be. It has always been this way. Ever since Cain and Abel, even to our reading last Sunday. As Peter and the others proclaimed the works of God on Pentecost, many who heard believed and were baptized. But others, mocking, said the disciples were simply drunk. We see it today. The same Jesus comes here whenever His Word is preached and taught. The same Spirit is at work. Yet, while some become faithful in the pew, listening with eager ears and hearts, others do not. While some become faithful at the Lord's Table, coming regularly to be fed, others do not. While some become faithful with their offerings, giving cheerfully and sacrificially, others do not.

There is a word in our text which gets to the heart of the issue. It's used three times. However, the meaning is blurred in our English translation. We need to look at the word in the Greek text to fully understand it. In our insert today, the word is "keep." "*If anyone keeps My Word,*" says Jesus, "*he will never see death.*" But in the Greek the word is better translated as "guard." There are similarities between the two, yet the difference is of vital importance for us. If someone hands you a key and says, "Keep this for me," that is not the same as saying, "Guard this for me." We keep all sorts of things. Some things we store in our attic. Other things we keep in our closets. But when we guard something, we know where it is at all times. We watch it closely because it is something of great value.

Cain kept the Word of God spoken by his father, Adam. But Abel guarded it. Cain kept the promise of the Savior in his mind somewhere...he knew it. But Abel guarded it in his heart. Because Abel guarded it, his worship was sincere. Cain still worshiped, but he sat in the pew wanting it to be over already. On Pentecost many devout Jews listened to the apostles and, guarding their message, were baptized and became devout Christians. Others, hearing the same message, did not guard it in hearts full of faith, and these had no use for God's Word and church.

You can only guard something which has been given to you. On Memorial Day we remember and thank God for our country's soldiers in every branch of the military who gave their lives guarding our freedoms. They were given this responsibility and because they guarded what was charged to them, we remain a free country today. You have been given something even greater by God than the freedoms we enjoy. In your baptism you are given eternal life. Just as we, as American citizens, have

not earned our freedoms, but were born into them, so you were born into the gifts God gives. All you are and have as a Christian was gifted to you through your birth into Christ in baptism.

But sadly, many Christians, perhaps even most, keep these gifts, but do not guard them. We are tempted--all of us are tempted to treat the gifts of God only as things that we keep and not as things that we guard. Do you suppose that the person who has the winning lottery ticket worth close to \$600 million put that ticket with other papers and items having little or no value? That ticket was certainly guarded in the safest place possible. We guard our earthly treasures pretty well, but not so much our heavenly treasures.

And this gives us away, for we guard those things we treasure the most. We guard our family time, our relaxation time, the time we spend doing what we enjoy. We guard it because we value it. Do we guard as well our time in the Word of God at home and at church? Our time at the Lord's Table? Our time meditating on the Word and in prayer? We guard our money. We're careful how we spend it because it is of value to us. Do we also guard our offerings to the Lord, making sure that He receives the first-fruits each month? If we're honest with ourselves, we may discover that we tend to guard our earthly treasures, but we only keep, and do not really guard, our heavenly treasures.

The wonderful thing for us is that God's Word acts as a guard for us whenever it is planted within us. God's Word is like medicine. We take medicine to guard ourselves. A cancer patient cannot fight off his cancer, but the medicine that he takes acts to guard his body against his cancer. That is how God's Word acts within you. When you hear it in church and study it at home, that Word, like medicine, guards you against the Evil One. It guards you against your sin. It guards you against an evil conscience. We as sinful sheep do not guard ourselves very well, but your Shepherd guards you because you are precious to Him.

Do you realize that Jesus guarded you more than He guarded Himself? He did not come to this earth to serve His own needs. He came to serve you. He came to be your guard, fighting Satan for you because we are too weak and sinful to guard against his temptations. Jesus did not guard His own life because He valued you more than He valued even Himself. He suffered, He died, He endured the penalty of hell because He was guarding you. In our text Jesus says of Himself, "*I guard (God's) Word.*" He kept that Word. He fulfilled it. But even more, He lived His entire life by it. It was before Him at all times. He guarded it like a treasure. Which is why Jesus lived and died for you--because the Father's word to the Son was that He should let down His guard and be crucified for sinners.

This is your God--He who loves you, who guards you, who forgives you. He forgives you for guarding the lesser gifts more than His Word and Sacraments. He forgives you purely by grace. He forgives you for Jesus' sake. This is your God who gives you eternal life as a gift. Why would any of us, therefore, not want to guard His gifts to us? Why would we not want to guard His Word? Why would we not want to guard with joy our life of service to Him in response?

Anyone can keep God's Word in their head somewhere. But you are called upon to guard it in your heart. And because this Word is coming into you, it will act as a guard for you like good medicine. And next week, when the Sacrament will be on the altar, this medicine will not only be placed into your ears; it will be given into your mouth. Jesus is your guard. We can never have too much of Him--the good medicine. Amen.