

## SERMON FOR SUN. SEPT. 26, 2021

Pent 18B 2021 Mark 9:38-50 "Cut Off"

Dear fellow redeemed of, by and for Christ, the question we must wrestle with this morning is how seriously do we take Jesus?

Do we react with horror at His commands in our Gospel reading? Or do we hear Him and, after a moment of awkward silence, laugh uncomfortably, shake our heads, and walk away, untouched and unaffected?

What do we do with a Jesus who threatens Hell and suggests self-mutilation or drowning by millstone? Some would neuter His teaching, saying that He never really talked about Hell. That was added later by over-zealous disciples.

He didn't really mean that stuff about a donkey-size millstone—unless, of course, it's my "righteous" anger that's been aroused.

He wasn't serious about cutting off your hand and your foot and putting out your eye; that's just too morbid.

Or maybe it is we who are not being serious—serious about our sin, that is; serious about the sins we love so much that we have convinced ourselves they are not really sin, no matter what the Word of God says; serious about the sin into which we lead others, and the sin into which we ourselves willingly go.

To cause others to sin is to scandalize; the true scandal is not a politician accepting too many campaign contributions, but anything that causes one of Christ's little ones to be separated from Him.

Even the smallest sin cuts a person off from Jesus in this world, which will, unrepented, lead to being cut off eternally: in the place called in Greek Gehenna, where **"their worm does not end and the fire is not extinguished."**

Gehenna, understand, was not made for you or any human; it was made for the devil and his angels. Nevertheless, humans who are in league with Satan will receive the punishment reserved for him.

So it would be literally and infinitely better to cut off a hand, or a foot, or gouge out an eye, and enter life under the Reign of God crippled, than to enter Hell/Gehenna whole.

It would be better to be drowned with a large millstone around your neck, than to cause someone else to enter Gehenna.

Jesus is not joking; He is not speaking metaphorically. He means it: do not cause yourself to sin, and do not cause others to sin.

Be careful, little hands, what you touch: Do not handle anything that will cause you to sin, even if everyone else is doing it.

Be careful, little feet, where you go: Do not walk into any place that will cause you to sin, and do not walk around with people who will cause you to sin. It is better to enter life never having touched something or never having gone somewhere than to be thrown into Gehenna with a full bundle of life experiences.

Be careful, little eyes, what you see: Do not look at your computer or your TV if it will cause you to sin, even if it's only in your mind. If it will cause you to lust or to covet, shut it off. Failing that, throw it away. It is better to enter life with no TV and no computer than to be thrown into Gehenna with high-definition, high-speed, surround-sound access.

Jesus says that, when it comes to sin and death, hands and feet and eyes are not as necessary as we think they are, and that physical death is nothing compared to eternal death.

For the sake of the Christ's Name we bear, the Name He has given to us and put on us, He is relentless in the pursuit of sinners and in the pursuit of their sin, to cut it out and kill it.

Because sin is never harmless. Even if you do not lose your salvation because of some particular sin, it always wounds, always hardens, always numbs.

Sin always puts something between you and your God; there is no exception. And sin unconfessed will put an eternal something between you and God.

So, no, Jesus will not take it easy. He will not lighten up. He will not give either the Twelve or us a break.

What if we take Him as seriously as He takes our sin? I don't recommend it, but let's say, for the sake of seriousness, that you were to cut off your hand if you stole something, or your foot when you walked "**in the counsel of the wicked.**" or took out our eye when you saw something that planted sinful thoughts or intentions or desires into your mind?

Okay. What then? How long until the other hand, or the other foot, or the other eye did or saw something requiring amputation?

Then, handless, footless, and blind, how long until your ears brought you to sin and, like van Gogh, you put a knife to them?

But, unfortunately for us, we know that everything is in the firing synapses in our brains, so off with our heads.

But say we still lived as headless torsos; our hearts are deceitful above all things, so, just to be safe, we should take them out as well.

But even if we were completely cut off, it could not atone for the sin we have and the sins we've done.

So Jesus was; Jesus was completely cut off. Cut off from His friends, cut off from His family, cut off from His Father, the source of Life itself.

Jesus was cut off from life so He could cut us off from death. Cut off by our sin so He could cut us off from our sin.

Jesus become a scandal in His flesh, the scandal of God dying, so that we, for whom He died, would not be a scandal in our cross-marked flesh.

He was the eternal sacrifice, salted with the fire of Hell, in order to make us living sacrifices, salted like burnt offerings for the sake of the little ones we serve. And we are all the little ones, as many as trust the Jesus of whom the Scriptures testify.

So we all serve each other, our lives lived like salt in the midst of a decaying world.

We all serve each other, our congregations a demonstration of the peace which the world cannot give and does not know, a peace created by the presence of Jesus in our midst, as He speaks to us and feeds us with His own body and blood.

If anyone bears the same Name we bear, if anyone confesses the same cross and resurrection, we welcome that one as belonging to Christ.

If anyone does a mighty work in the Name of Jesus, we rejoice in the Lord who has worked it.

If the Lord has entrusted to us the little ones of all ages, we will not cut them off from the means of their salvation.

We will invite them to hear the Word with us, and when the Word has created a living faith, we will invite them to the Supper of their Lord and ours.

And we will pray together for the mercy of God in Jesus for our failures: for hindering God's work through someone else, though they did it in the true Name and power of Jesus.

For not giving even the minimum assistance to those who belong to Christ.

For causing sin to grow in our little ones because we did not give them the Word to strengthen the faith of their baptism.

For all of this, we deserve millstones and mutilation and Hell/Gehenna. And so did the Twelve.

But Jesus did not cut them off, in spite of their hard-heartedness; He chose them and forgave them.

By His Spirit He preserved them and still preserves them, until the day when they will receive their reward in full.

And neither will He cut you off from Himself. He chose you, and put His Name on you; as the catechism states, "***In this Christian church [the Spirit] daily and richly forgives" your sins and the sins of all believers.***"

By that Spirit He preserves you, as you are poured out for the sake of Christ and His chosen ones. He will preserve you as His living sacrifice in the place He has put you, serving those who belong to Christ, so that you will surely not lose your reward.

You see, the One who speaks these words came not to condemn us with them, but to save us from them. That we deserve, we may not receive, but instead live that life which is better. A life that is whole and complete and unburdened by sin.

And so He gives us His Spirit in Baptism so that we'd hold forth the truth in a world of lies. That we would value, esteem and defend life in a world of death. That we would be a light in world darkened by sin.

That we would show kindness in a cold, cruel world. That we'd be merciful in a world of selfishness. That's God's love for us would overflow in to the lives of others in a hate filled world.

May God create those attributes in you, and when, inevitably you fall short of God's ideal for Christian behavior, that you'd remember that Jesus was cut off for you, so you wouldn't be cut off from God.

And remember that the depths of the sea you which your sins would cast you into is, for Jesus' sake, not a sea of condemnation and death, but instead a sea of mercy; a sea of forgiveness, the sea of Holy Baptism.

For there is the water that Jesus Himself was baptized, that your millstone might be hung around His neck instead of yours. So praise God that in those waters your death became His death and His life became your life. AMEN