

The First Sunday in Angels' Tide, September 26, 2021

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminster, Massachusetts

Hard Words, True and Good

Mark 9:38–50

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

Jesus said: **“If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It’s better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It’s better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It’s better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell”** (vv 43–47).

Whatever Jesus says, He says for our benefit. That goes for *everything* He says, but especially for the hard things and the things we don’t like to hear. We ignore Him to our harm. When He disciplines us, it’s for our good. It’s *always* for our good. When He wounds us, it’s not to make us hurt but to make us whole. A good physician knows that some illnesses and injuries require the knife. It makes us scared, but they know what they’re doing. We’ll probably feel worse before we feel better, but that’s just how it goes. We’ll often need follow up appointments and more medicine, even for the rest of our lives. Their best work may leave scars, even permanent ones, but those are the scars that save. Now if that’s true of our physical bodies, how much more is it true of us spiritually, of our souls. The more severe the illness, the more severe the remedy. Strong sickness, strong medicine.

But you do know this about Jesus. You *know* that He loves you. You know that He’d do the exact same thing to Himself, and more, if it would help you. He’d give His right hand to save you, or His beautiful foot, or His precious eye. He’d rather be crippled, lame, and partially blind, than enter life without you. That’s no exaggeration. But that’s not all. He’d go even further. To save you, He’d be cut off from the land of the living. He’d be thrown into hell, to the unquenchable fire and the undying worm.

The devil and his demons wouldn’t do that. They say they love us, but they don’t. They say they’re here to help us, but they’re not. Everything they say — *everything* — has poison mixed in. That’s especially true of the things that appeal to us, of the things that make us feel good, the things we want to hear. The devil is like a doctor who treats cancer

with candy. In the moment, it tastes good and we feel better. He offers us a second opinion. He says we can keep our hands, our feet, and our eyes, so long as we put ourselves entirely into his care. “Trust me,” he says, “you can be your true self. You can have what you want. *And* you can live forever in a warm climate.” Two hands, two feet, two eyes. Do whatever you want with them. No knife necessary. No scars. Feel good. Follow your passions. Be who you want to be. Just ignore the fine print at the bottom of the page.

The easier way has its appeal, I suppose. Would you rather go to the doctor that recommends surgery or to the one who gives you candy? To be brutally honest, sometimes I go for the candy. Would you rather go under the knife and get rid of the sickness or keep all your limbs as well as the gangrene? Would you rather go to someone who tells you you’re fine just the way you are or to someone who will tell you the truth, even when it hurts?

Jesus tells the truth, the hard truth. The devil lies, though his lies are so sweet.

Whom will you trust? Which opinion will you take? Which path will you follow?

Thank God, you’re here at the triage hospital set up by Jesus, and not off in the devil’s waiting room somewhere. You’re willing to sit here for an hour plus, week after week, to listen to whatever He has to say and to let Him do whatever He needs to do.

First thing, this week, is that He takes the devil’s fine print and enlarges it. He wants you to know exactly what it says. He wants you to see where that second opinion leads. He wants you to know the danger you’re in when you listen to the devil and his lies and place yourself into his care. So Jesus gives us this warning: **“If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It’s better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It’s better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It’s better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched”** (vv 43–48).

The American author, Flannery O’Connor, once said, “To the hard of hearing, you shout, and, for the almost blind, you draw large and startling figures.” That’s what Jesus is doing here. He shouts, because He knows that by nature we are hard of hearing. He draws large and startling figures so we can see just how grotesque and deadly sin is. He calls for amputation. He reminds us of the fires of hell. He’s saying once again,

“Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mk 8:35).

So which limbs in your life are candidates for amputation? Which members of your body are infected with sin? What are you so attached to that you would destroy your faith for it? What things do you need to lose, give up, or chop off before they drag you to hell? You cannot have your sin, delight in it, cherish it, and enter eternal life, too.

How do we respond to Jesus’ words? By saying this: If it’s the knife that I need, Lord, then by all means wield it. Don’t spare us Your care. Cut out whatever You need to cut out—diseased organs, infected members, sin-sick soul, pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, sloth, gluttony. Apply whatever medicine You have to my situation. Then keep me in Your regular care, that I might read the daily prescription You provide in Your Word and attend the weekly appointments You offer in the church.

In Romans chapter six, St. Paul explains what Holy Baptism means for our daily lives. By baptism, we were all baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection. We have died to sin so that we might walk in the newness of life. He goes on to say this: **“Let not sin reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Don’t present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who’ve been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace”** (Rom 6:12–14). Getting rid of the disease of sin and its hold on our lives required more than an amputation. Taking off a hand or a foot or getting rid of an eye wasn’t enough. Sin in us had to be drowned and die. That what baptism does and is still doing its work in your life and in mine.

In 1 Corinthians, St. Paul also says this about our bodies: **“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body”** (1 Cor 6:19–20). Our bodies are not ours to do whatever we want with them. They don’t belong to us. They belong to God. Our members are not ours to use as we please but as He pleases. This doctor requires our entire bodies, head to toe, to be placed into His care. He is, you might say, the one true holistic doctor. He has a plan for us and for our bodies. He wants you to be what He created you to be.

You were bought with a price. That brings us back to Jesus. For us to be what God intended us to be, Jesus had to do what He did. He took our sin on Himself—the sin of our feet, our hands, our eyes, and all our members. The doctor took the sickness into

His own body. He took it on Himself, and then cut it off by allowing Himself to be cut off from the Father, cast into the depths of hell, and suffer eternal punishment for our sin. It happened on the cross. His feet were nailed. His hands stretched out. His eyes bloodied. Then **at the ninth hour [He] cried out with a loud voice, “Eloi, eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” . . . And [He] uttered a loud cry and breathed His last** (Mk 15:34, 37).

That’s the price He paid for your body, dear Christian. Treasure your body the way He does and use it for good as He would have you do. Deny yourself, even if it hurts, and come, follow Him. He loves you. He knows what is good for you. He knows what you can and will be by God’s grace. Better than being true to yourself is to be a child of God, and so you are. You are dead to sin, and you are free live as a child of God in this world.

What Jesus gives you isn’t candy. It’s eternal life. The medicine of immortality. I can’t promise that you’ll always feel better when you take it, or that it will always taste good, but I can promise that it’s always good for you. And, even if you feel worse, even if you lose limbs or end up with scars, remember the scars He got fighting for you. Better is coming. He’s not done with you yet, and He’s not done with your body. He rose from the dead, and so will you, even as you now live in Him and through Him.

And one day, under His care, He’ll be by your bedside as your eyes close again. He’ll finish what He’s already begun in you. And then you’ll wake up, with limbs moving like they’ve never moved before and eyes seeing what they’ve never seen before, and all will be well, all will be well.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
