

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
Pentecost 18B (Proper 21B)
September 26, 2021
Mark 9:38-50

Salted with Fire

“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. 43 And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. . . .” (Mark 9:42-43 ESV)

In the Name of Jesus, the only Savior of the world.

Today our dear Lord speaks hard words, yet we dare not ignore them or pass them by. Yes, they are troublesome words, this talk of drowning oneself, cutting off one’s hands and feet, and plucking out one’s eyes. As disgusting and distasteful as all this may be, we must consider what He says. After all, “The reader of the Word cannot select out comfortable passages and ignore those that make us uneasy.” (Chrysostom). So as we listen to our Lord today, let us listen closely so that we may hear correctly.

Now we must be certain that Jesus is serious about what He says. Yet, we must not think that He is commanding us to cut off our body parts or those of someone else. For while Christ says, “. . . if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. . . .”, sin does not originate with the hands, feet, or eyes, for elsewhere Jesus says, “For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.” (Mark 7:21-22). And with those words Jesus simply echoes what the prophet Jeremiah had proclaimed long before, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick.” (Jer. 17:9). So, you see, long before sin can be acted out by the hands, or feet, or eyes, or any other part of our bodies, it has already come to life in the heart. So it’s not those body parts that are the real problem, and removing them won’t fix what’s wrong.

So do you see now how serious your sin is? And not only for yourself, but for others as well? For if your sin causes another believer in Christ, especially a new believer, a child in the faith, to stumble, or to fall, into sin, it is a most serious matter that has eternal consequences, for that person and for you. For such sin can lead a person to think that God doesn’t take his sin very seriously and so it isn’t very important, or that it’s not really sin at all, or even that it’s actually a virtue, something good. Or it can lead him to doubt, or even despair of Christ’s goodness, grace, mercy, love, and forgiveness toward him. Yes, such sin can lead a person back to unbelief.

That’s why Jesus uses such graphic language. Imagine the terror you would feel if your hands and feet were bound together, tied to ten cinder blocks, and you were altogether pushed into the middle of the lake. That terror is nothing compared to the terrifying wrath you will

experience from God if you take your eternal life for granted, and if you allow your impious words or actions or lifestyle to offend against God and those who share the faith with you. For this reason, Christians carefully observe the Ten Commandments, not so they may please God and thus earn salvation, but so they may love their neighbor, serve him, and protect him from sin.

Now, as harsh as this is, dear saints, the good news is that it is out of His great love for you that your Lord speaks so pointedly to you. He is motivated by His self-sacrificing compassion for you when He calls upon you to regard your sins with the same gravity as He regards them. He wants you to see your sins as He sees them, so that you may repent and gratefully embrace the forgiveness and mercy by which He releases you from them. And He speaks mercy to you even in this harsh Gospel, for He proclaims to you, "Everyone will be salted with fire" (Mark 9:49). With these words, our Lord Jesus promises the salt of His Word, through which we are purified from every sin and given peace with our heavenly Father, for Jesus' sake.

For Jesus speaks these words to His disciples, to Christians, so these words could also be stated, "Every Christian will be salted with fire." This, like our Lord's words about millstones and amputations, is another figure of speech. He does not intend for you to think that large hailstones of burning salt will be fired down upon you from heaven.

The verb He uses here – that of salting – is a verb commonly used of sacrifices, which were salted before they were offered up on the altar. By salting a sacrifice, the priest made the offering acceptable to God. So, when your Lord Jesus says, "Everyone will be salted," He means, "Every Christian will in some way be made acceptable to God."

Both salt and fire are likewise used elsewhere in the Scriptures as purifying agents. Yet what shall purify us other than the pure Word of God? What shall cleanse us from our death-deserving sins, other than the Word and teaching of our Lord Jesus, with all its saving and preserving strength? For Christ has died for your sins that you may live. He sacrificed Himself on the cross as the offering that won your forgiveness. He rose from the dead to live for you and with you forever. "Everyone will be salted," that is, every Christian will be made acceptable to God by the power and strength of His Word, which He speaks to you on account of Christ.

When our Lord says "everyone" in this Gospel, He certainly includes you. The salty, purifying, and sanctifying work of God's Word is promised to you as you continue to battle the temptations of the flesh. By this salty Word, you will find strength and encouragement in the face of temptation. By this salty Word, you will be made acceptable to God, for the Word delivers to you the merits of your Christ. By this salty Word, you shall be preserved unto eternal life. To be salted with fire it to be preserved in true faith, not by your own actions, but by the work of God. This is the Gospel promise: "Everyone will be salted with fire" (Mark 9:49).

Then Jesus finally says, "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another" (Mark 9:50). When the salt of the Word is sprinkled upon you, the Word takes up residence in you. Luther saw this image of sprinkling with salt as a baptismal reference, and he even used salt at

baptisms, placing a small amount of it on the child's tongue as an image of the Word. The indwelling of the Word is the work of God, and through it, you have peace with one another. Have salt in yourselves, dear Christians! Let the Word of God continue to have its place in your heart. It shall complete its work there: it shall act as a preservative and preserve you in true faith unto life everlasting. It has brought you peace with God, and it will continue to produce peace with your neighbor. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Rev. Timothy J. Landskroener