**Mark 9:38-50 September 26, 2021**

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

Our text for this morning comes from our Gospel lesson; Mark chapter 9 here re-reading these words. “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.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It’s hard to figure out the “absolute” truth to something in our world today because we’re constantly finding comparisons and running into different opinions. For something to be “absolute” means that there is no confusion about its definition, that it stands completely on its own and is regarded by a single understanding. The dictionary defines absolute as something that is universally valid, or to put it simply it’s something that can’t be compared. Which is probably where the difficulty comes in when we try to figure out absolutes in a world of opinions. Many times we try to pass off our own opinions as “absolutes” saying things like, “I make the single greatest chili” or “There is no one better than me at this or that.” These statements don’t hold much water after they are compared to others. Those statements were relative statements, they were up for debate and could be changed. Some people may have agreed with you but others would have taken exception and given comparisons. Things that are absolutes are truths in life, like good and evil, up and down, and even life and death. There are things in life that can’t be argued, and aren’t relative. They are what you’ve read referenced the last few weeks as simply the facts of life, realizations that you come to learn and understand as you get older or even after you experience these facts of life firsthand. Like the fact that we all are growing older, and our earthly bodies will break down, grow weaker, and we will eventually die. No one can argue against that. Or that we owe money to the governing authorities and have to pay taxes or else we will be fined, or thrown in jail. There’s no argument to that either. Here in our Gospel lesson for today, when Jesus talks about the harsh nature of sin, what he’s really doing is teaching in an absolute way, that sin is so serious that there is absolutely nothing worse, than remaining in unrepentant sin to the point of your death because that death won’t just be physical, it won’t just be our bodies breaking down and the moment we leave this world. Left in unrepentant sin, left in a rejection of God and wishing to be separated from God, this will be a death that is both physical and spiritual for all eternity.

And while the world may argue against that, and give different opinions, and even compare the life of the Christian to the life of the unbeliever and focus solely on our own works of happiness and contentment, the truth is, that sin is an absolute. An absolute reality for anyone who is conceived and born into this world, Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” and Psalm 51:5, “Surely I was sinful from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” Sin is an absolute reality, and sin equals death. The death of the body, the breaking down of our earthly bodies as we now are living in a world completely defiled with sin. And the death of faith, as faith is strangled and snuffed out by giving in to the temptations of Satan, the ignoring of God’s Word and Will, and the constant betrayal of God’s commands and His promise. Sin is death, and that’s what Jesus is teaching. Sin is serious. There is no other opinion. Sin is an absolute in that it must be avoided, repented off, and removed or else death is the only reality that awaits.

How serious is sin? Well, Jesus specifically says, that sin is so corruptive, and that sin is so dangerous and deadly, that the punishment for scandalizing, or tempting someone who is as susceptible to sin, and ignorant of sin as a little child, is so horrible, that it would be *better* for that person, if a great millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea. Tempting someone else to sin is so serious that a punishment as horrible as drowning in the depths of the sea would be better than what awaits them. Because hell is described as a place of eternal torment, of unquenchable fire, and where even the lowliest of creatures, something as insignificant as a worm, even its life remains in this place of torment.

How serious is sin? Jesus goes on to teach that if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. Or if your foot causes you to sin, you should cut it off as well. Or even if your eye causes you to sin, you should pluck it out. For it is better to go through life crippled, or lame, or with only one eye, than to enter into eternal punishment with your whole body intact. That’s how important it is to refrain from sin, to turn from sin, to not give in to the temptations of sin. It’s so important that *whatever* needs to be done to refrain from sinning should be done, rather than think that sin is ever excused or overlooked in the eyes of God.

Because sin is never seen by God as anything but rebellion, and betrayal. There is no such thing as a small sin in the eyes of God, there is no such thing as an “excusable” sin in the eyes of God. And unrepentant sin remains forever, to all eternity, counted against us, staining the perfect white garment of Christ’s perfection which was put upon us in our Baptism. Unrepentant sins are the chains that keep us shackled to sin and slaves to sin. Unrepentant sin is the poison that keeps us flat on our backs, dead to sin, dead to our trespasses, and enemies of God. And it would be better for us to be maimed or hurt, than to be God’s enemies.

Sin is serious. Sin is dangerous. Sin is something that we can attempt to hide, and may even succeed in hiding from our friends, our family, our neighbors, our husbands or wives, our children, our co-workers, our fellow believers and brothers and sisters in Christ gathered here today, you may hide your sin from everyone in your life, even me, your pastor. But sin is never hidden from God. For while we can’t judge or see the true desires of each other’s hearts here today, God sees everything. As David writes in Psalm 44: “If we had forgotten the name of our God Or extended our hands to a strange god, Would not God find this out? For He knows the secrets of the heart.” God knows what we do. And God never excuses sin. Sin has to be paid for, all of it, every last thing that we have done wrong, from the bad we commit against ourselves and those around us, to the good we fail to do out of laziness and selfishness. Sin’s price is death, and left on its own, sin will only lead to our own destruction. It’s an absolute truth in our lives.

Jesus comes in our Gospel lesson to teach about the serious ramifications of tempting others to sin. He comes to tell anyone who will listen of the seriousness of sin and its horrendous price. And while we are sinners, we are simultaneously saints. Not because of our own actions, not on account of anything we have done, but for the simple fact, that when we come to Christ’s altar, lay our sins down before God our Heavenly Father, and put on the sackcloth and ashes, the signs of the people in the Old Testament that they were sorrowful for their sin, the signs of true contrition and repentance before God, our sins are forgiven. Not on account of our faithfulness, not on account of our works or the small, microscopic good that we may have thought we accomplished at some point in our lives, but completely and totally on account of the work of Jesus Christ our Savior.

Sin equals death, that we know is true, it’s an absolute truth, but so is this: Christ equals life. That through Jesus’ death on the cross, the punishment of sin has been paid, that all sin that was committed and will ever be committed was nailed to the cross, because Christ himself who was without sin became sin for you. As St. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” He is the life of all the living, because outside of him there is nothing but death. He is the great physician of the only true disease we suffer from which is the sin we were brought into this world with, and he himself heals us of that disease by dying on the cross in our place. The only fear we have of sin is in the moments when we turn a blind eye to the destruction that sin is, or when we think that sin is something we can fight, or overcome on our own. The danger of sin is something we take upon ourselves when we neglect to come and lay those sins before God and receive His absolution and forgiveness. And the punishment of sin is received only by those who reject the free gift of eternal life by continuing in unrepentant sin and living lives of service to themselves rather than God.

For we are God’s children, which means that we are tested in the times of our lives when temptation comes to our door. We are tempted and in that temptation we are molded, and strengthened by the fires of this world. In the times when things don’t go the way we have planned, in the moments when our faith is pushed to the brink and our world is turned upside down. That’s what Jesus is saying when he speaks about salt at the end of our Gospel lesson. “Salt is good but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again?” Faith is good but left untested what good is it? And once faith is gone, how will it be returned? So we are to have salt in ourselves. So we are to trust in the faith created in our hearts. So we are to be strengthened by His promises in His Word in the moments of our life when it seems all hope is lost, or when it seems that sin, and death, and the power of the devil have won.

For I promise you, and this is an absolute truth of life, just as sin equals death, and Christ equals life. Hard times will come. Temptations will continue. The Church will be besieged in the years to come as it has in the past, and as it is right now. Your faith will be tested, and the only thing that will keep you and strengthen you, is the love of Jesus Christ. A love so strong that it swallowed up and destroyed death forever when he rose from the dead. A love so strong that it saw you when you were covered in sin, and an enemy of God, and still came and died for you. A love that remains with us, as we go out into this world, and find those who are lost in sin, defiled by sin, corrupted to the core by pet sins and temptations that they have been deceived into thinking don’t matter. And in those moments, may we speak the truth of God’s Word, in the love of Jesus Christ, that calls the sinner to himself and forgives them without a second thought.

For in Jesus Christ is forgiveness, it’s an absolute truth. It’s a fact of life. That we all are eye-witnesses of in our own lives. For while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. May that bring you comfort, peace, and understanding. And may we all heed the words of Mark as he reminds us and tells us at the end of our Gospel lesson today. “Have salt in yourselves” rely on the faith created in your hearts, stay in the truth of God’s Word and the strength that comes only from our Heavenly Father and the work of His Son. And finally, be at peace with one another. Go in that peace. Serve the Lord. And show others the love, that has been shown to you.

Amen.

Now may the peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus.

Amen.