**Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**September 26, 2021**

**Text—Mark 9:38-50**

It always makes me a little bit nervous and anxious to read it. I see what it says, and then I wonder what it would be like if I actually did those things. I’m talking about our Gospel text for this morning, in which Jesus tells his disciples: “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.” And then he also says you should cut off your foot too and pluck out your eye if they cause you to sin, because it’s better to enter the kingdom of God without those parts of your body than it is to be thrown into hell with them. Now undoubtedly, what Jesus says is true. Yes, I would much rather have eternal life in the kingdom of God with only one hand, foot, or eye than I would keep all those body parts and burn in hell forever. That’s not actually that hard of a decision. Give me the choice between getting my hand cut off and burning in hell for all eternity, I’ll let you take my hand every time.

But are those really the only alternatives? Is it really hell on the one hand and amputation on the other? Frankly, I’d prefer the third option: keep all my body parts AND get into heaven. And it seems that Jesus does leave us room for a third option. He doesn’t say cutting off your hand or foot or plucking out your eye is a prerequisite for entering the kingdom. He just says that you need to do that if those parts cause you to sin. If they don’t cause you to sin, then you’re home free. So perhaps, instead of removing the parts of our bodies that cause us to sin, we should just prevent them from allowing us to sin. That way we could have our cake and eat it too. We could avoid mutilating ourselves and inherit eternal life at the same time. Sounds like the best of both worlds to me.

Except not allowing ourselves to fall into sin is not the easiest thing in the world. The problem is that there are just so many temptations out there, and our own bodies tend to be the way in which we are exposed to them. Take our eyes. How often do our eyes lead us into sin? We see our neighbor’s big house or fancy car, and we want them for ourselves. We see something on the news that makes us angry, and we are filled with wrath against whomever we think deserves it. We see that handsome man or beautiful woman walking down the street, and we lust after them. Or maybe we content ourselves with looking at images on our computer screens for those purposes. Our eyes lead us into all kinds of sin, sin that maybe we could avoid if we didn’t have them. Perhaps we should just pluck out one of our eyes; perhaps we should pluck them both out. That would be the best way to ensure that they did not lead us into sin, and it would give us a better chance of making it into eternal life.

And it’s not just our eyes either; think about our hands and our feet as well, as Jesus did. Our hands take things that don’t belong to us and strike others in anger. Our feet take us into places we don’t belong. If we aren’t careful, they can lead us into sin just as much as our eyes can. Maybe we need to cut them off as well. It would certainly hurt, but nowhere nearly as much as the eternal fires of hell would. If we can avoid hell by cutting off our hands and feet, then maybe we should at least give it a serious thought.

But then we need to think about other parts of our bodies as well, that Jesus didn’t mention. Can’t they all lead us into sin as well? Our ears hear all kinds of gossipy things that lead us into judgment of others; maybe we should cut them off. Our tongues share that gossip, and they also hurl insults at people who make us angry, so maybe we should tear them out. Our stomachs make us greedy and gluttonous, so perhaps they need to be surgically removed. But ultimately, what really causes all of these sinful acts are our brains, right? Those are the nerve centers of our bodies; they control all of our thoughts, words, and actions. We could cut off everything else, but then we’d still be alone with our greedy, lustful, and angry thoughts. So unfortunately, it appears that the only way we could be sure to purify ourselves of sin would be to cut off our heads. That’s the only way we could become sinless and perfect, to remove all of the sinful thoughts and desires from ourselves. If we want to take Jesus seriously here, then perhaps that’s ultimately what we need to do.

Well, I don’t know about you, but something tells me that this is not what Jesus actually had in mind when he told his disciples to cut things off if they cause them to sin. For starters, none of Jesus’ disciples and followers from back then actually did that, as far as we know. One would imagine that Jesus would have gotten pretty angry with people who claimed to believe in him if they weren’t willing to do what he said. And no Christians since then, apart from some fanatics, have done that to themselves either. None of us here have done it, including me. So are we all going to go to hell as a result? No, we’re not. Like he did some other times, Jesus is simply speaking hyperbolically in this passage to make a point. He doesn’t literally want us to mutilate ourselves. Otherwise, all of his closest followers would have done so, because they were sinners just like us. Their eyes and hands and feet caused them to sin just as much as ours do now. So Jesus must be telling us something else with this very strong language. And as I see it, he is making two main points in this passage.

The first is that sin is very serious indeed, and it can certainly send us to hell if we do not keep it in check. If we give ourselves over to lives of sin and deliberately ignore the Law of God, he will not be pleased with us and will punish us as our deeds deserve. We cannot say that we believe in Jesus as our Lord and Savior on the one hand and then turn around and lead lives of gross, unrepentant immorality on the other. So we should be willing to do whatever it takes to help us live purely and righteously in God’s eyes. We don’t need to cut off our hands or pluck out our eyes, but maybe we should be willing to cut other things out of our lives that cause us to sin. If being around that man or woman is causing you to have impure thoughts, maybe you should stay away from that person. If you are looking at inappropriate things on your computer or smartphone, then maybe you should cut that out of your life. If watching the news or writing on online message boards is causing you to be angry and say terrible things, then perhaps you need to give that a rest. There are plenty of things that make us more susceptible to sin that we can remove from our lives, and although it may be a sacrifice to do so, it’s certainly not as much of a sacrifice as cutting off a hand or a foot. We can thus read Jesus’ statements here metaphorically: if there is something significant in your life that is causing you to sin, get rid of it. It’s not worth the spiritual damage it’s causing to keep this thing around and perhaps be led astray from the faith. It is impossible to avoid sin in this life, but anything we can do to help ourselves is certainly worth doing.

In the end, though, it is indeed impossible for us to avoid sin completely, or even mostly. No matter how many temptations we cut out of our lives, how hard we try to stay pure, there will always be something that causes us to sin. Our sinful world does not want us to be righteous, and neither do our own sinful natures. We will never attain the perfection that God desires for us. And that’s ultimately the second point that Jesus makes in this text: that to truly cut sin out of our lives would be so painful, so costly that it is not possible for an ordinary human being to do it. In order to purge our lives of sin, we need someone else to help us. And that someone is Jesus himself. Instead of us suffering to remove sin from our lives, Jesus is the one who suffered. What he went through was far worse than losing a hand or a foot or an eye: he went through the most excruciating and humiliating death imaginable when he was crucified for us. And not only did he suffer physical abuse; he suffered the total absence of God the Father on the cross. He suffered the equivalent of the fires of hell for you and me, so that we would not burn in hell for all eternity. All of the sins we have failed to remove from our lives, he took them upon himself and paid for them by shedding his own blood to atone for them. He has endured the wrath of God himself, so that it will no longer come down upon us. His suffering has saved us from the eternal suffering of hell, so that we now have nothing to fear as we stand in the presence of God. He will ultimately judge all people, but he will judge us worthy of eternal life, not because of anything we have done, but because of what Jesus did for us on the cross.

Ultimately, then, our entering eternal life does not depend on us cutting off body parts, or even cutting sinful temptations out of our lives. Yes, we should seek to lead lives free of sin, and yes, if we do give ourselves over to immorality, then we stand a good chance of leading ourselves away from the faith. We should strive as hard as we can to live righteous lives that are pleasing to God. However, we sinners know that we will never attain the perfection he expects of us, but we also know that he has done so in our place. His love and mercy for us conquers even our many sins, and so we do not need to be afraid of being thrown into hell. Rather, we can bask in the grace of God and be confident that he has saved us through the suffering and death of his Son. His love for us will never fade, and it will never change, no matter what we may do to sin against him or others. We can always repent and ask him for forgiveness, and we know that he will always receive us with joy. Sin is certainly dangerous and strong, but God’s love for us in Jesus Christ is even stronger.

So now it looks like we can breathe a sigh of relief as we read Jesus’ words in our Gospel text. The prospect of self-mutilation was quite unpleasant, and the prospect of burning in hell forever was even less so. However, there is indeed a third option for us Christians; we can have our cake and eat it too. We can simply believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, and his righteousness will cover our sinfulness and make us worthy to inherit eternal life. He willingly went to suffering in our place, so that we do not have to suffer to earn our way into God’s favor. That work has already been accomplished, and we now receive all of the blessings that Jesus earned for us. So put away all of those hatchets and axes, because there won’t be any chopping off of hands, feet, or eyes today. Simply believe in Jesus Christ, and his blood will cover all of your sins. Amen.