

Extreme Measures
St. Mark's Gospel 9:38-50
Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri
September 27, 2015 – Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost



Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. The words which come forth from Jesus' lips in this morning's Gospel – to say the least – are jarring, disturbing and disquieting. Listen to them again. "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better to be lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire."

Do you recall the news story a few years back about a man named Aaron Ralston? At first blush the name probably doesn't sound familiar – and indeed, I wouldn't have remembered either had I not Googled it. Aaron Ralston was a rock climber – a rock climber who, in 2003, decided he would go out by himself to do some exploring in a steep mountain range somewhere south of Moab, Utah. As Aaron was making his way up into a narrow gorge, suddenly he heard a boulder falling toward him from above. It landed right on top of him and pinned his right arm, immobilizing him far from where anyone was ever likely to find him alive.

It didn't take long for him to come to the realization that if he didn't take some sort of extreme measures, he probably wouldn't survive. So, sometime after running out of water a couple of days after the accident – having been trapped by this time for nearly four days – this young man finally decided the time had come to take those extreme measures – or face certain death. That was when he pulled a knife out of his pocket and proceeded to cut his arm off just below the elbow! After doing that he somehow managed to affix some anchors into the canyon wall, and tying a rope to them, lowered himself to more level ground where he then hiked out and met the rescue party who had been sent to find him. Search efforts had begun on Wednesday, but they'd yielded no sign of the young hiker – and given the ruggedness of the terrain, few believed they'd ever find him alive. But Thursday afternoon he

walked out of the canyon on his own power with two other hikers – and continues to climb mountains to this day!

It's hard, isn't it, to imagine a situation so serious – a circumstance so desperate – that you would decide the only option open to you was to take a knife and cut off your own arm! Once you make a decision like that, there's no turning back. Once you make the first cut, you're going to have to follow through, or you'll likely die. How do you make the choice to plunge a knife into your own flesh to sever a limb from your body? Well, I'm not sure, but I do know that our almighty God has instilled in each us a tenacious will to live – a will so strong that the mind might, at times, even entertain or contemplate a choice such as the one Aaron had to make.

All of you have known cancer patients – or someone who's suffered under the weight of a lengthy illness – who later rebounded just when it seemed they were on the brink of death. Such accounts give us inspiring evidence that our God created us not to die, but to live. History also gives a great many examples of men and women who were willing to put their own life on the line for a good and just cause – many doing so in order to bear witness to their Christian faith. Forfeiting the life they'd been given by God, they bore testimony to the fact that there are few things in this world that are of any greater value than life itself. Most especially what comes to my mind is the scene from the last "Luther" movie, where the German Princes, loyal to Luther's Biblical Theology, bowed their heads before the Emperor to be cut off rather than giving up the Word of God and the Gospel. These men undoubtedly treasured their own lives – because God had also instilled in them a stubborn desire to live – yet they treasured one thing even more than life itself – the Gospel of our dear Lord, Jesus Christ.

So, we know in our day that there's at least one who would rather cut off his arm rather than lose his life. And while you may not be sure whether you could ever do such a thing, there *are* people who have been able to do it. Life, you see – physical life at least – *is* that valuable to most of us. But, what about carrying that tenacity for life – that passion for living – into the realm of the spiritual? Is it worth a hand, a foot, or an eye, do you think, to live eternally? Remember, Jesus

says "...if your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out!" Is that **really** what Jesus is calling you to do – to literally maim yourself to escape the eternal fires of hell? Well, if that were true, I dare say none of us would have any arms, legs, eyes or ears. Yet, if you can imagine a situation where a person might have to cut off a limb to save his life, why can't you also imagine a situation where a person might have to do the very same thing to save his eternal soul? I maintain that's because we don't fully recognize the imminent threat sin poses. To us, sin just isn't that big a deal!

Yet our Lord Christ here in this text takes sin very seriously indeed – particularly those sins which might cause another believer to stumble or fall from the faith. Our age is a part of that seedy culture which coined the phrase "victimless crime" to refer to transgressions committed by two consenting adults – or one person acting alone – where no one is "hurt" by their actions or behavior. Yet, is there **really** such a thing as a victimless crime? Is there **really** any sin which claims only the sinner who committed it as its victim? James reminds us in his Epistle that even Christians sometimes devour one another with their words. We forget that we're called to be witnesses to one another just as much as we're called to be witnesses to the world. So we dabble in sin as if our sins were our business alone. We feel justified in a cause we've taken on as a personal crusade, behaving in that cause as if we knew nothing of the love, mercy and forgiveness of Christ. We hide behind an aura of righteousness and goodness, but deep down inside are filled with anger and a desire to hurt and destroy others. We live as if what we do is of no consequence to anyone other than ourselves, when, in fact, we know in our heart of hearts that our actions may indeed lead others – and yes, even ourselves – to stray far from the faith.

Jesus says that in such circumstances it would be better to have a milestone tied around our neck and be thrown into the depths of the sea, rather than to cause one of these little ones who believe in Him to stumble. You see, these **are** serious matters – and they require extreme measures. So, while there's no doubt in my mind that Christ's words here are hyperbole – that is, they're used only for effect – the fact that Christ feels the necessity of using them at all shows us just how serious a matter this really is. Christ's words here express a serious need for **each of us** to examine our lives and repent of our sin – most especially those which cause another believer to stumble and fall from the faith.

The ancients took much of what Jesus said here in Mark 9 literally, and so a goodly number of them fell into the practice of abusing their bodies in a mistaken

effort to save their souls. Luther even writes how – before the grace and favor of God had been clearly revealed to him – he flogged himself with switches in a futile effort to drive away his sin. Others denied their bodies the essentials of food and water. Some took vows of poverty and lived as monks in an attempt to harness the wickedness that raged within them. Origen – one of the Early Church Fathers – even emasculated himself in order to curb the desires of his flesh.

Jesus however, uses the imagery of extreme measures to call you to repentance – and with that call to flee to Him and His cross. Jesus' words here – instead of causing you to cut off the parts of your body which are involved in sin – ought to move you instead to confess your sins – to take seriously the words of confession we all mouthed only a few moments ago – to truly believe that you **do** daily sin against God by your thoughts, words, and deeds – that you **are** a poor, miserable sinner who deserve nothing from God other than His wrath and hot indignation over your sin. And for you who do take these words seriously, the solution to your desperate situation is even now before you sitting on this Altar in simple bread and wine.

You see, just because God might never call you to cut off a limb or remove a pesky organ in order to save your life, don't think that such extreme measures as this weren't necessary in order for God to deal with your sin. What else was it when God sent His only-begotten Son to die on the cross in your place – if it wasn't Christ suffering the consequences of the sin of the world which threatened to keep us all out of heaven? As Christ hung there on the cross for you, He was removing all those things that would otherwise be an obstacle to you receiving the eternal life God deigns to give us all. Jesus was cut off for a time from the land of the living so that your sin might not cause God on the Last Day to cut you off from Him for all eternity. And now Jesus comes to you here in this place to show you His body – wounded for your transgressions and pierced for your iniquities – so that you might thereby receive freely all He died on the cross to earn for us all. Hear the words of forgiveness as they're spoken to you today, dear Christian – and believe that according to God's promise you have what God wants you to have. Receive the body and blood of our Savior – and be strengthened unto eternal life according to God's good will and pleasure. And trusting that all this is true, live the life God has given you to live – and all to the praise and glory of His most holy name. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.