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Pentecost 19

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
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“The Fire of God – Now or Later?”

Text: Mark 9:38-50

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The words that we heard in the Holy Gospel for today are powerful words. And imagine, for a moment, what all of us here today would look like if we actually did what those words say and cut off offending and sinning members of our bodies! What parts of your body would you have left? . . .

- + Our **feet** have taken us to places we do not belong and we know we should not be.
- + Our **hands** have touched what should not have been touched and taken what did not belong to us, and have been much too slow to help.
- + Our **tongues** have spoken words we know were not true, words that were unkind, words that hurt other people and their reputations.
- + Our **eyes** have wandered where they should not have.
- + Our **ears** have drunk in gossip and filled our minds with thoughts that should not be thought.
- + Our **minds** have thought thoughts that we would be ashamed if other people knew.
- + Our **hearts** are filled with sinful desires and selfish ambitions and greed.
- + We have **sat** in the company of people who mock God with their words and lives without saying a word.
- + Our **backs** have bent in compromise with the ways of the world instead of standing tall and firm on God’s unchanging and wholly truthful Word.
- + Our have bent our **knees** before false gods, we have turned up our **noses** at what God desires of us, and our **shoulders** refuse to carry the cross our Lord would desire us to carry.

. . . Have I missed any parts? Probably – but you can fill in the rest. Its not hard to do!

If we actually did what these words of Jesus tell us to do . . . not one of us would be here. Every part and every member of our bodies is stained with sin. But we don't do those things -- maiming and dismembering our bodies. But why not? Jesus Himself spoke these words to His disciples -- do we now just disregard them? Picking and choosing which of God's Word we will follow and which we will not? Clearly we cannot do that. Every part of God's Word is important for our lives. . . . But then we must ask again: why don't we follow these words of Jesus? And the answer, of course, is forgiveness. We don't cut off our body parts because Jesus forgives our sin. But while that is the answer, at the same time its not quite that simple. Because some people, perhaps many people, will use that answer to make the mistake of not taking sin -- and the consequences of sin -- seriously enough. And our attitude may become "Well, we can do this because we know God will forgive us." Or, "We won't get caught . . . and God will forgive us!" Or maybe even in the thinking that "The ends justify the means. Therefore its okay as long as something good comes out of it." . . . But that kind of an attitude toward sin is a completely different attitude than we see in these serious words of Jesus in the Holy Gospel. It is an attitude which *minimizes* the seriousness of sin. An attitude which regards forgiveness very lightly. . . . But Jesus does not regard sin so lightly. He knows that sin -- which is rebellion against God and His will, and not just the breaking of some rule -- must be taken seriously. So seriously, in fact, that He also tells His disciples that "***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.***" . . . And He's serious. Jesus is providing a stern warning for us here. Your sin cannot be so easily shrugged off with the attitude, "Oh well, I'm forgiven!" Your sin has serious consequences.

And knowing that makes the next sentence that Jesus speaks sound very ominous: "***Everyone will be salted with fire.***" And the fire we should immediately think of when we hear that is the fire of hell, for that is what Jesus was just talking about when He said that for those who are thrown into hell, "***their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.***" And if you've ever felt the pain of a burn, then you can imagine what that unending burning will feel like . . . and that those who experience it will wish they had cut off their hands and feet and everything else while they still had the chance! Your sin has serious consequences.

But for you and I and all believers in Christ, the good news is that those consequences have already been dealt with. That's what it means when we say that we're forgiven -- not that God just *overlooks* what we have done wrong, or *ignores* it -- but that He has dealt with it. Because it had to be dealt with, and instead of making us maim ourselves and cut off our body parts -- which, as we read, is what should happen because of our sin -- instead, Jesus came to deal with it personally. And He did -- by offering all the parts of

His body on the cross, in place of all the parts of our body that sin. And all the parts of His body were, in a way, cut off. Think about it:

- + **Our feet** take us where we do not belong, so He offered His feet to be nailed in place.
- + **Our hands** touch what they should not, so He offered His hands to be pierced so they could not touch or close around anything.
- + **Our tongues** speak gossip and lies and unkind words, so He offered His tongue to become swollen and dry and to be burned with stinging wine vinegar.
- + **Our eyes** have wandered, so He offered His eyes to be closed in death.
- + **Our minds** think sinful thoughts, so He offered His head to be pierced with thorns.
- + **Our hearts** beat with sinful desires, so He offered His heart to be stopped in death, with no blood left to pump after it ran into the ground.
- + **Our stomachs** demand too much food, so He offered His stomach to be pierced with a sword.
- + **Our backs** bend in compromise with a sinful world, so He offered His back to be ripped open with 39 painful lashes.
- + **Our shoulders** refuse to carry our crosses, so He bent His shoulders to accept our burdens.

. . . And the fire that was meant for us, that should have consumed us because of our sin, consumed Jesus instead, as He offered Himself as a sacrifice in our place.

And knowing that will help us to properly understand what Jesus meant *for us* when He said ***“Everyone will be salted with fire.”*** That fire cannot just mean the fire of the punishment of hell because not everyone will experience that. We will not experience that because Jesus has taken that for us, in our place. Rather, what Jesus is referring to here as “fire” is the very presence of God. For all throughout the Bible, fire is used to show the presence of God. For example, Moses stood before God at the burning bush. The sacrifices in the Old Testament that were offered to God were consumed by fire. God was the pillar of fire that led the Israelites through the wilderness. The tongues of fire on the disciples’ heads at Pentecost indicated the presence of the Holy Spirit. And even here in our church we use the flames of the candles at the altar to indicate the presence of God. . . . And therefore when Jesus says here that ***“Everyone will be salted by fire”*** He means that everyone will be required to come into the presence of God. For those who are not in Christ, it will be a consuming fire, the fire of hell, the fire of the

unending presence of the wrath of God. . . . But *for us*, those who ***“have been baptized into Christ”***, who by faith receive the forgiveness of sins earned by Christ’s sacrifice on the cross – we live in the gracious, loving presence of God. On our own, we should be afraid of that fire! But the wrath of God against our sin was already poured out upon Jesus. And therefore in Christ, the presence of God is now for us a Fatherly presence, a loving and encouraging presence, a forgiving presence.

And we are living in that presence right now – that is not something that will only happen in the future. He comes to us now, really and truly, in the simple means of water, Word, and bread and wine so that we will not fear His presence because of our sin, but gladly ***“draw near to Him”*** to receive His gifts for us – His forgiveness and His Spirit. . . . It is really a sign of His gentleness and mercy that He comes to us so simply. First, as a simple, humble man walking this earth with His disciples, and in the simplest of means as He comes to us still today. So we would not fear Him. Some wish that God would make a bigger show of it, but if He came to us in His glory, with His legions of angels, if we were able to see the wrath of God poured out upon Him – we would not be able to stand it! . . . And so He comes to us gently, quietly, almost insignificantly, to salt us with His gracious, forgiving presence. And as He does, He fulfills the words that Moses spoke at the end of our Old Testament Lesson, when Moses said: ***“Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord would put His Spirit on them!”*** The Lord has given His Spirit to us. We now speak His Word as we speak of Him to the world in our words and deed. And as He continues to salt us with His grace, His forgiveness, and His love, so we salt the world, as we live as His children and freely give to others what He has freely given to us.

And that is why we don’t carry out these words of Jesus in the Holy Gospel. That is why we don’t cut off our hands and feet and pluck out our eyes – because Jesus doesn’t want us to offer them in payment for sin, He has already done that! We now have the high privilege and opportunity to offer them to Him, in His service, so that through us He may continue to salt the world. That through us He may continue to come into the lives of those who do not yet know Him. So that through us, His will and His work will be done.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.