**19th Sunday after Pentecost – Year B – Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY**

**Based on Mark 9:38-50 written by Pastor Paul Horn**

**“We’re going to have to amputate…”**

*38 “Teacher,” said John, “we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.” 39 “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, 40 for whoever is not against us is for us. 41 I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward. 42 “And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. 43 If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. 45 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. 47 And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, 48 where “‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’ (Isaiah 66:24) 49 Everyone will be salted with fire. 50 “Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other.”*

Do you remember Aron Ralston? In April of 2003 he entered Utah's Bluejohn Canyon to go climbing. At one point he became trapped when an 800-pound boulder shifted, crushed his hand, and pinned him to the canyon wall. For six days, Ralston struggled to free himself while warding off dehydration and hypothermia. Trapped and facing certain death, Ralston chose a final option: using a multitool, the climber amputated his right hand, then rappelled 65 feet down a sheer cliff to the canyon floor below. Would you be able to do that, go that far in order to survive?

This is what Jesus asks of us as Christians. This morning Jesus will teach us that sometimes it is necessary for us as Christians to cut off a limb or two to survive spiritually, and if we don’t the danger is that we will die spiritually. We will explore the meaning of Jesus’ teaching in our lesson from Mark chapter 9.

Jesus and his disciples were in the town of Capernaum, located on the northern coast of the Sea of Galilee. Last Sunday we heard Jesus teach his disciples, “**If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all. Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me**.” (Mark 9:35-37) Today Jesus continues that conversation and says, “**If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck**.” Jesus wanted to impress upon his disciples the seriousness of sin. An especially grievous sin would be causing a little child who believes in Jesus to stumble in their faith. It would be better if that person were dead.

Think about your attitudes, your actions, the words come from your mouth. Is there anything that might cause children to sin? Your attitude toward church and Bible study – is it a positive example you want children to follow later in life? What about discipline? Do you discipline in love or in anger – do you follow up with forgiveness – do you dig up past sins and throw them in their face? If so, we need to think seriously – are we causing children to sin by our words? Because children, whether they are ours or not, pay close attention to how adults behave and they listen very closely to what we say. If we continue to cause children who believe in Jesus to sin, Jesus says, we would be better off dead.

Jesus went on, “If your foot causes you to sin, or your hand, cut them off. If you eye causes you to sin, gouge it out. It would be better to enter heaven with one eye, or one hand or one foot, than to be thrown into hell with all of your digits.” Does Jesus mean that we should literally cut off our hand or pluck out our eye if it causes us to sin? Jesus was not promoting self-mutilation. No, but he is teaching us the seriousness of sin. That we would be willing to go to those extreme measures to cut sin off and out of our lives. Here Jesus is using the present tense in the Greek language so he literally is saying, “If your foot continues to cause you to sin...” He is describing continual, habitual sin, reoccurring and persistent sinning.

In the movie *Fireproof* a marriage is on the brink of ruin because of internet pornography. The husband finally realized what it was doing to his marriage and how it was affecting his job. One afternoon, while his wife was at work, he took the computer out of his house, set it up in his driveway and took a baseball bat to it until it was demolished. In the place of that computer he placed a picture of him and his wife and a vase of flowers.

Would we be so willing to go to that extreme to cut off persistent sinning on our part? To block a cell phone number to eliminate suggestive texting, block an email address or Facebook account? Or blocking channels on our television or canceling the subscription all together? Would we be willing to give up drinking alcohol altogether if we know that it is a problem for us? And as far as our mouths go, we cannot duct tape them shut. And if we did, it doesn’t stop our minds from thinking resentful thoughts, from anger, from holding a grudge against someone. It doesn’t stop our hearts from burning with resentment toward others. Wouldn’t we finally have to cut out our hearts, the seat of emotion, and then amputate the head, the throne of memory? How will we amputate those?

The sinful nature shudders in horror and protests, “Not that! Don’t give up that! I love it too much!” What is the alternative? Enjoy pleasures for a short time and endure suffering forever, where in hell the worm will eat away at us inside and will not die, where the fire will burn and will not quenched? What is the alternative? To enjoy pleasures of sin now and be cut off from God for all eternity? That’s what hell is, separation from God’s love for all eternity.

I spoke with another pastor who had visited his parent’s home. He was looking through old photo albums and noticed some old family reunion pictures. An individual had been cut out of the pictures with a pair of scissors. When he asked his mother about it, she said, “Oh, she was one of the cousins. But they’re not part of the family anymore.” That’s kind of harsh, but it describes how serious our habitual sins are, the consequence of failing to cut off our sins. Cut off from the family of God.

All that is left to us is to cry: God, be merciful to me, a sinner. Pardon, cleanse, and restore me, that I may live not to serve myself but you!

Listen to these words from the prophet Isaiah as he shares what Jesus did for us, “**By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people, to whom the punishment was due?**” (Isaiah 53:8)

Transgression here means rebellion. Because of my rebellion, my stubbornness to cut off sin, Jesus was cut off from the land of the living; in other words, he was put to death because of my rebellion. My sins caused his suffering, each sin a nail that pierced his flesh, a lash from the Soldier’s whip that tore out his back. He was cut off from life because of me. And not only that, he was cut off from his own Father, rejected by his own Father because God judged Jesus as the rebellious one instead of you and me. He had to cut off his own Son, so that you and I would not be!

How great is the love Jesus has for you and me that he willingly went to Calvary to be cut off by his Father for our transgressions! We were cut off from the family of God, but now through Christ we are reconciled to him – God the Father drew you to himself because of Christ Jesus. (2Corinthians 5) He drew you back into his family. The Father adopted you as his child through the waters of baptism, now vividly depicted on our new stained glass window. Here we have also the font, the paschal candle - all visual reminders of your adoption, how God brought you to himself.

For in the waters of holy baptism God the Father says to you, “My child, I know you have sinned against me, and have refused to cut off those sins, but I still love you, and forgive you for the sake of my Son, Jesus, and I because of him, have cleansed you from those sins. You are my child.” There at the font the Father applied Christ’s resurrection to you. There he raised you to live a new life, a new life that takes sin seriously. In this new life in Christ you and I will be willing to amputate anything that causes us to continue to sin – that is, to take drastic measures, no matter how difficult it may be, no matter how much our sinful flesh cries out and moans and complains and stomps its feet. It is better to cut ties with these sins, better to go into eternity with Jesus.

As a member of Christ’s family, you and I will be willing to take a baseball bat to the computer if that’s what it takes. You and I will be willing to think before we speak, especially in front of children and younger Christians. We will be willing to block phone numbers or unfriend folks on Facebook, disconnect the cable or satellite TV, if that’s what it takes to cut off sin and temptation. We will be willing to cut off a relationship in order to preserve a more important relationship. We would rather go without in this life and be connected to Christ and his family.

Doing whatever it takes to remain connected to Jesus, just “as a branch remains connected to the vine” means that we will regularly receive God’s Word in worship and Bible study in our church and in our homes. We will faithfully receive the Lord’s Supper where through Jesus’ body and blood the Father reassures us that we are still part of his family. We will do whatever it takes to remain connected to Christ – rescheduling our calendars, reevaluating our commitments, reprioritizing time spent with Jesus in his Word, where he draws us to himself.

One of the benefits of being part of Christ is that you have a family, a family that will not judge you or look down on you if you come to them for help, but who will support you in your struggle against sin and temptation, who will pick you up when you fall. The members of this family will point you to Christ and encourage you to receive his Word and Sacrament where you will remain connected to Christ and to them. When you remain connected to Christ, he enables you to do amazing things…

…just like Aron Ralston. Despite his disability, he has gone on to do amazing things. He had the goal of climbing all of Colorado's “fourteeners” — peaks over 14,000 ft high, of which there are 54 — solo and during winter (a feat that had never been recorded). He has achieved this goal. As Christians we will have to amputate, but with the strength of the Holy Spirit empowering us through his Word and his Sacraments, we will walk toward our goal, eternity in heaven with our Savior, where we will be connected to him and to each other forever. I pray that God grant you the strength to remain connected to Christ despite being an amputee. Amen!