

Written Copy: Mark 9:38-43, 48 “Remaining Useful Kingdom Tools”

Proper 21:19th Sunday @ Pentecost

Sunday, September 29th, 2024

Text: Mark 9:38-43, 48

³⁸ John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." ³⁹ But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ For the one who is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward. ⁴² "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. ⁴³ 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. ⁴⁸ 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

The text's intent

As His body on earth in mission, we are called to work together in humble service as tools of the Holy Spirit to save people out of Satan's grasp and welcome them into the eternal reign and rule of Christ. We serve humbly using the gifts and talents God has given us, realizing He blesses even the seemingly smallest action done for His name. What we should never do is discourage a fellow kingdom worker just because he isn't part of our congregation. Even worse, we should make sure we never act in such a way as to cause a believer to fall from faith. Our eternal consequence will make drowning with a huge millstone around the neck preferable. The consequence of falling away from faith is eternal suffering that is so awful, it would be preferable to spend eternal life in a maimed, lame, and half blind body, than to suffer eternal torment in a whole body. To do this work we are salted with the Holy Spirit. We are to work with the Spirit to remain His tools used in conversion. As we do so, we work as humble servants in peace with God and one another.

Focus Statement:

Knowing we are prone to focus sinfully on ourselves our gracious merciful Father sent His only Son to live, suffer, die, and rise again. In this performed the greatest act of unselfish love, in order to save you from eternal torment. He gives you this gracious gift through the Spirit working in the Gospel. The Spirit works to keep us in repentant faith that protects us from falling away, while making us useful tools for His kingdom.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

We can become so focused on ourselves personally or our congregation that we fail to be His Church in mission in the world, and so work against Him. We can be tools to keep people from believing or make them fall away rather than save them. The eternal consequences of working against Jesus' mission or our falling from faith are awful beyond imagination.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Work with the Spirit to remain useful tools through our participation in the means of grace. Work unselfishly with one another and other Christians not to build our Church but build His kingdom, knowing He will provide what is needed to keep us being useful tools

Subject Sentence: The Spirit keeps us useful tools in Jesus' Kingdom

Introduction: Trying to Work with a Dull Tool

Have you ever tried to chop wood using a dull axe, or cut a log with an old and flimsy tree saw? Ever tried to cut down a tree with a chainsaw that doesn't work right or have enough power to work through the size of tree you're trying to cut? It's painful and frustrating work, isn't it? And it's dangerous, especially with a dull axe or chainsaw that's not working properly. You are setting yourself up to cut off an arm or a leg instead of the tree.

Have you ever tried to cut vegetables with a knife that is dull? Or how about making bread or cookie dough with a mixer that is old and unable to do the job? Kneading the dough by hand instead of using an electric appliance is hard work.

How fun is it to vacuum with a vacuum cleaner that doesn't pick up the dirt very well, and you have to keep going over and over the same spot again and again? Have you ever just given up and bent down and picked up the big pieces by hand? And there is nothing like a broom whose bristles are so frayed and bent that it spreads the dirt around instead of sweeping it up.

The bottom line is pretty self-evident: if you want to do a good job you need a tool that is sharp, well built, and appropriate for the job. It's true for the work we do around the house and in the yard. It's also true for the work we have been called to do as members of the household of God, our Lord and Savior's Church.

Jesus has called us to be useful tools in His kingdom. But when we are not, it not only makes the job harder, but it also makes our life now and our life to come harder and more painful than you ever want to know.

Working Together to Do Kingdom Work

If you remember from last Sunday's Gospel Lesson Jesus was teaching the Twelve Disciples as well as us what it means to serve in His kingdom, His reign and rule, His Church. It's not about who is the most important, but who has the heart to serve others. And what is it we are to serve? Like a waiter bring food and drinks in a restaurant we are to serve up the Gospel Message to those who Christ points us to. We are to emulate the One who is the greatest in the kingdom, in the Church, which is Jesus Himself.

Mark 9:38 John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."

This previous lesson appears to be lost on John the disciple. Right after Jesus teaching that humble service is what is important John brings up this sinfully selfish action on his part and the part of the other disciples present. He is saying to Jesus, ***“Hey Jesus, just so you know, we saw this dude casting out a demon. He wasn’t one of us, the chosen followers of you, and yet He was using your name. I mean who does this guy think he is! So of course, we told him to cease and desist. But he didn’t listen. He kept on doing it. By the way, we know where he is in case you want to have some words with him!”***

What is behind this action of John and the other members of the elite Twelve? Perhaps a little bit of jealousy? After all, this non-member of their inner circle is doing what they were unable to do in the Gospel Lesson two Sundays ago with that child that had a demon. In his selfishness John fails to realize an important truth, whoever this guy is, he is successfully casting the demon out. As Jesus has taught earlier, it takes a stronger man to remove a strong man from his stronghold. A man on his own doesn’t have the power to order a demon out. Even a person that is using Jesus’ name like a magic formula won’t be successful. In fact, just like using a dull tool, invoking Jesus’ name without faith in it would earn for you a world of hurt in the hands of that demon.

Mark 9:39-40 ³⁹ **But Jesus said, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ For the one who is not against us is for us.**

Jesus’ point? ***“The fact that He is using my name and can do this mighty work means He does it with My authority and Father’s authority. He is doing kingdom work on my behalf”***. Jesus is saying to them and to us, that He has more irons in the fire at work for Him than perhaps we will ever imagine or know. Just because someone is not a member of our congregation, or Synod, or denomination, doesn’t give us the right to denounce what they are doing, especially if they are serving in the name and faith of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. So, what then are we to do as useful tools in the hands of our Lord?

Mark 9:41 ⁴¹ **For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.**

Jesus is saying to John that he should’ve come alongside the other man, and instead of trying to stand in the way, or stop him, he should’ve helped him. Even the smallest act of assistance to another who is acting as a minister of the Gospel does not go unnoticed by our Lord. And by supporting another with the gifts we have been given means an eternal reward, life now and eternally with the soul that the Spirit used to save them.

Working Against Christ and His Kingdom

Jesus goes on to make another very important point about the work He has for us to do in His kingdom, as members of His Church. Not only should we join together to work for Him in His kingdom, we need to make sure we are not working against Him.

Mark 9:42 “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.”

It might seem like Jesus has moved on to another topic, but He hasn't. He's talking about what we will earn for ourselves if we stand in the way of the kingdom work Jesus wants done.

Now it's important to know that what Jesus is talking about here is more than just how a believer slips up and disobeys Him, more than just the daily sins we all commit that are forgiven by repentant faith. A better way to translate what is being said is “*Whoever may cause a believer to fall from faith by becoming an ensnaring trap in their life.*” And how might we become that ensnaring trap? By what John was doing, instead helping a fellow Christian do the work of spreading the Gospel we stand in the way of it. This would include things we might do inadvertently because we are “turned in” on ourselves, so focused on ourselves that we forget the mission statement we have as Lamb of God. Our mission is to build one another up in faith so that we can go out as individuals as well as His Church and give witness to our faith in Christ in word and deed.

We do this as a Church when we fail to support the mission work that is going on by others outside of our congregation. We do this when we become so focused on ourselves and our needs here with in our congregation that we stop supporting local ministries like Franklin Avenue Mission, the Luke Clinic, Flint Crisis Pregnancy Center, Heartbeat Crib, and the Eastern Foodbank of Michigan, who supplies many outreach ministries including Franklin Avenue Mission. We do this when we decide that ministries which don't benefit our immediate area are not worthy of our support. We do this when we focus on Fellowship Events that reach out to our congregation, but don't invite others outside of this building to join us. We do this when we expect the lost to come to us, and stop seeing ourselves, each one of us, as missionaries sent out into the mission field that is the world.

It's no small matter to be standing in the way of Jesus' work to call people into His kingdom. When we are the cause for someone to fall away from their faith, or to prevent someone from coming to faith, Jesus says it would be better to have a millstone put over your head and be cast into the sea. Now this millstone is not the small kind that one person would turn to crush wheat or grapes. This is the huge kind that took a donkey or an ox to turn. With this over your head, you would sink down and down and down, with no chance of coming to the surface, until your lungs could no longer hold out and you breathed out the last breath you are holding, and in comes the water to fill your lungs, and you drown.

Mark 9:47-48 ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'

How bad is it and how hopeless is it to give up your faith and walk away from Christ? It's eternal pain and punishment that involves your physical body, your emotional well-being, as well as your spirit. The word translated as "hell" is literally "Gehenna". It was the valley west and south of Jerusalem. In the time before the Babylonian exile, it was the place where unbelieving Jews sacrificed their children to Canaanite gods. In Jesus day it was the garbage dump where all kinds of refuse, including body parts of animal sacrifices that were not burned or eaten, were thrown and were burned. It smelled terrible. It was filthy. And there was always a fire burning. And what the fire didn't consume became maggot and worm food. That's why it's a perfect word picture for the eternal torment that will await all those who give up their faith in Christ. It's so bad that it would be better to live in eternal life minus an arm, or a leg, or a hand, or a foot, or an eye, than to face eternal torment there.

Christ Came to Save Us from the Fires of Eternal Torment

Thanks be to God that His desire is that none of you should ever go there. He was so adamant about it that He sent His precious beloved Son to face it for you. God the Son became one of us so that His body was not just maimed. He came to suffer horribly and give up His life on the cross for you. Because of His suffering there is nothing left for you to suffer. He died to remove all the ways you purposefully and inadvertently oppose His kingdom work.

His life, death, and resurrection are not only the power to keep you from suffering eternal hell, it is the power that saves unbelievers from spending their eternity in hell. The Holy Spirit applies this gracious work of Christ to the hearts of unbelievers through the Gospel Message to turn their lives around. He uses that message to plant the power of faith in their hearts which turns them away from themselves and their desire to be God, and instead look to Christ as not just Savior, but the Lord God of their life. Through the words of Scripture all come to know Jesus as the God the Son who gives life to all things. And through our baptism we are born again to a new life, a life lived with Him now that doesn't end with our death in this world. Through the promise of the resurrection, we hold that our death in this world is the door to eternal life to come.

The Spirit Fashions Us into Useful Tools of the Kingdom

It's the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit through the words of Scripture and the Sacraments that changes us from being faulty broken tools that stand in the way of Jesus' work to create faith and into useful tools He uses to build His kingdom.

He teaches us that Gospel Message so that we can better share it with others. He teaches us that He desires all people be saved, both those who look like us and live like us, as well as those whose lives are radically different. He teaches us that He wants to call our neighbors here in Mundy Township, as well as Grand Blanc, Burton, and even in Flint itself. He desires that we should work to minister to people here in Genessee county, in Michigan, in the United States, and across the world.

That's a big job; an impossible one if it was just up to you and me. But it's not. Remember, Jesus has more irons in the fire than we will ever know. He only asks that we do our part with what He has given us to share with others. Yes, that means our treasure, especially in ministering to those not near us. But for those within our arms reach it means our time and talents. It means not focusing only on us, but intentionally sharing the Gospel by word and action with those around us. It means being good stewards of God's gracious gifts, both as individuals and the Church to build up one another's faith as well as to share that faith in the world around us both near and far. It means working with the Holy Spirit to change us from being dull unsharpened tools who are focused inward on ourselves, and instead becoming useful tools whose focus is outward toward those He puts in our path.

Conclusion

I remember back when I was in my early 30's, after I had settled down somewhat, had started a family, and bought a house. I hadn't seen any reason or need to return to Church. The Presbyterian Church my family attended when I was growing up sent an elder around to see me. I was out back chopping wood, using an axe and a splitter that really needed to be sharpened. He came back and started to talk to me. I was sweaty, somewhat unfriendly, in fact kind of gruff with him. I remember he pointed out that my work would go better if I sharpened my axe. I brought the axe way back over my head and in anger brought it down on the log I was trying to split. It split all right. Half of it went flying in the air almost hitting this man. He got the message and soon split after that. The Church never sent anyone to bug me again. They gave up on me. Thank God the Lord never did.

The Holy Spirit has worked on me mightily since then. He is the One who did the work of conversion in me, as well as the continuing work of keeping me in faith. He is the One who is doing that same work in you today. He is at work to sharpen you through your growing in knowledge and faith with the goal to make and keep you us useful tools in Jesus' kingdom. He can do amazing things with the dullest of tools, case in point: me. How is He at work in you right now to make you a useful tool in His kingdom, the Church? How should you thank and praise Him? How can you work with Him to grow your faith. How can you share that faith this week? He promises to continue His work in you today, and every day until He calls you home. Amen.