

# "The Other End of the Arm"

Text: Mark 9:38-50

May God grant to each of us a faith that will not falter, though the waves of persecution and ridicule beat against it daily, and may that same God also grant us the wisdom to avoid ever becoming our own worst enemies. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

Although in reality a paraphrase of what he actually said, Leon Trotsky is credited with saying, "You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you." Christians today are in the midst of a culture war, and yet many don't seem to be all that interested. Rest assured it is interested in you. Whether we care to admit it or not, trends affect us. On the one hand that might seem like an overly obvious statement. *Of course trends affect us.* The problem is a bit more complicated than we might first suspect. We face several difficulties here. The first is that we tend to lament the bad things that are happening even while we imagine that we are somehow avoiding their effects – mostly because we are *aware of* what is going on. In other words, we tend to see society's slide into abject immorality as something happening to others. We try to keep the world at arm's length, so we assume we are protected. The problem is that as the "heat" increases, "arm's length" isn't always far enough.

Here's an example. If the police raid your next-door neighbor's house because he is assembling homemade fireworks in his basement, you should probably not stand by your window and watch. On the other hand, if you learn that your neighbor has a ton of fertilizer and 500 gallons of diesel fuel in his garage, you might want to take a drive out into the country until it is removed.

The point here is that Christians tend to miss the fact that the farther society drifts into abject immorality, the greater the danger and therefore the more decisively we need to separate ourselves. Again, arm's length doesn't necessarily cut it today.

That's the first problem we need to understand – that this isn't your grandparents' society we are dealing with. The second problem is that whenever we seek to hold evil at arm's length, we also need to consider very soberly just exactly what is on the other end of the arm. The answer, of course, is me – and you. *We* are on the other end of the arm by which we attempt to keep evil at bay, and there lives within us the same sorts of evil we see all around us. On the other end of that arm is my own sinful

flesh. That means evil isn't just "out there." It's also in here – within us. The problem is that we don't always fully recognize the problem. When we see, for example, a growing trend toward persecution of Christians in our country and around the world, we naturally assume that as confessional Christians we are, *of course*, the *victims*. What never crosses our minds is the idea that in some respects we might actually be the ones doing the persecuting. What if the problem isn't "out there"? What if the problem is me? What if I actually see the problem in the mirror? What if the problem is attached to my end of the arm? This is part of the instruction we gain from our text for this morning, found in the Ninth Chapter of Mark's Gospel.

ESV **Mark 9:38-50** *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." <sup>39</sup> 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. <sup>40</sup> For the one who is not against us is for us. <sup>41</sup> 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. <sup>42</sup> ¶ "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. <sup>43</sup> 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. <sup>45</sup> And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. <sup>47</sup> 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, <sup>48</sup> 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.' <sup>49</sup> For everyone will be salted with fire. <sup>50</sup> Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."*

This is God's Word – flawless in every respect and spoken by the Savior himself. That is why we can never study or meditate on these inspired words too often or too carefully. This is the pure, life-giving Bread of Life. That God the Holy Spirit would work his goodness in our hearts through our study of these words we pray, **"Sanctify us by Your Truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth!"** Amen.

Satan has had 6000 years to perfect his craft. He knows what works and what does not. Count on him to always return, in one form or

another, to what works. In fact with each advancement of mankind comes a repackaged variation on an old theme from the great Destroyer. So what are some of the trends in our day?

Polls have long verified what most of us have learned from experience: the vast majority of new contacts for any Christian Church – somewhere in the mid 90 percentile – are a direct result of face-to-face, heartfelt invitations from trusted friends and family members. The devil's counter-plan? Destroy man's power to personally communicate by making him forget *how* to communicate in the most effective way. Fill his world with the impersonal – with whatever form of communication is most easily overlooked, ignored, deleted. Teach man to text, tweet, Facebook, and email. Again, make it as impersonal as possible and as easily dismissed as possible. Share everything... and nothing – nothing, that is, of real, lasting, spiritual value.

Next problem for Satan: the availability of God's Word. Where once man yearned for the Word of God that he could not possess, now technology allows the gospel to be carried to nearly every corner of the world – instantly. The devil's solution to *that* problem? Destroy man's ability to concentrate in the absence of entertainment. Knowing that it takes a certain amount of work or effort to actually listen to God's Word and to apply it personally, his solution was to deaden mankind to whatever is not exciting, new, energizing, and stimulating. His reasoning is disturbingly accurate: who would ever want to sit and listen to someone talk when he could be killing Nazi Zombies, or being wowed by the latest viral video, or being dazzled by a non-stop, action-packed, tear-jerking feature film.

All of this makes it clear that Christians need to ask their God for divine *wisdom*. Daily. It needs to be a staple of our *daily* prayer-life if we are ever to have a chance at recognizing and counteracting the demonic threats that imperil our very souls on a daily basis. Our Savior in our text communicated to us in unforgettable words just how radical our separation from sin needs to be: **"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."** <sup>45</sup> **"And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off... And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out."**

What exactly is Jesus advocating here – that you gouge out an eye if you glance lustfully at someone who is not your spouse, or covet some possession not your own? He is rather teaching us that separation from sin is almost never a simple, painless process. Christians are well aware of just how seductive and addictive sinful pleasures can be – from loving to gossip to sexual immorality. Sin often feels good. It can even feel “right,”

which is why cutting such things from your life can feel almost like cutting away a part of yourself, so painful or difficult is the separation. Understand the devil's plan here. His ultimate goal is not to get us to sin – since he's well aware that Christ has paid the penalty for our sins and released us from their slavery. His goal is unbelief. We are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, but Satan knows that sin has the terrible power to erode and eventually destroy that saving faith. That's the far end of the arm – the evil that we want to push from our lives.

What about the other end? Our text also deals with another very real problem, and once again the problem isn't just "out there"; the problem is me. We pick up in our text with the disciples approaching Jesus in a bit of a righteous dither. Apparently someone in the area had been using Jesus' name to cast out demons. The nerve. But wait, wasn't that a *good* thing? Why would any follower of Jesus be upset with someone using Jesus' name to do good, to resist the devil and weaken his power over human beings? The disciples evidently believed that Jesus' name had a sort of copyright that protected it from being used by those outside of their intimate circle of followers. You can see here a bit of the petty jealousy that crops up in the disciples in Jesus' inner circle from time to time. They seemed to have lost sight of the object (defeating Satan and winning souls for Christ) because they were too preoccupied with the rules and regulations of the game.

As a conservative Christians, we face exactly the same threat. We can lose sight of the souls and the goals, and spend ourselves quarrelling about rules, procedures, and mannerisms. In effect, we forget the trees because we claim to be interested in the forest. We also expend a tremendous amount of energy warring against our allies.

So we ask again: *"Is there persecution against Christians today?"* Of course, but again we have to also ask the thematic question of our sermon for this morning. Because of the errors they promote, we are commanded to keep those who teach contrary to God's Word at arm's length, but what about the other end of that arm?

Don't underestimate either the importance or the difficulty of the problem that we face as confessional Christians living as we do in an increasingly Godless society. The disciples in our text wanted to make the problem go away by over-simplifying it: *If anyone is not a part of our little group, they are enemies.* In our text, Jesus lets them (and us) know that it's not that simple. In fact what he teaches here is often hard for confessional Christians to hear. It makes our job infinitely more

complex. We cannot fellowship with those who teach falsely, but we are not supposed to prevent or hinder the work they do in Christ's name. **"The one who is not against us is for us."**

Note however the perfect balance struck by our perfect Savior in our text. Three separate truths provide that balance. Remove any one, and the balance is destroyed. On the one hand, Jesus told his disciples not to hinder the man from doing what he was doing. **"For the one who is not against us is for us."** That's the first truth, and it should actually be most comforting both to acknowledge that truth and to remember it always. God accomplishes his good pleasure in a number of different ways. Yet there would have been no balance had Jesus left it at that. Satan would have been given too great a beachhead from which to mount attacks of all kinds against the Church. So Jesus provides perfect balance by establishing two other truths. The first is that while we are not to try to hinder the kingdom work of others, we are not supposed to join them. We need to separate from those who teach something **"contrary to the doctrine which you have learned,"** but it's not our job to try to prevent the Lord's work from being carried out through them. But what about the error? Condemn it and separate yourselves from it, but understand that it's not our job to fix another church's errors.

We tend to have a problem with that, don't we? We tend to see ourselves as the Super Heroes that are called to correct all injustices we encounter in life. We need to also therefore learn when to leave such things to God, *and to the Christian group that is teaching and promoting error.* So also in our text he provides that third point of balance: **"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."**

Do you see the problem if Jesus had not added this last? How easy for the devil to promote unionism, doctrinal laxity, and indifference. How easy for him to play down the importance of every single doctrine of Holy Scripture. Suppose Jesus had only given the command not to hinder another Christian's ministry. Wouldn't he have thereby been giving some sort of stamp of approval – not only on what other Christians were *doing*, but also on what they were *preaching and teaching*? Jesus erased any such nonsense with the dramatic words of verse 42, **"Whoever offends one of these little ones..."** To **"offend"** means to cause someone to stumble in their faith. It is a very strong word with its roots in the image of a death trap or deadfall set to crush the life out of an unsuspecting target. Jesus was not going to prevent those who were not part of his core group, but he offered all such the strongest of warnings concerning the effects of false

doctrine and practice on precious souls bought with his blood. Yet note how that warning was intended to be *self-applied*. We can and should speak the truth in love, but the correction has to be self-imposed – internally rectified, not externally. Their problems are not ours to correct.

Again we see the strength in Christian balance. There is nothing weak here, nothing non-committal or lukewarm. Christianity calls for drastic, decisive action – which should not surprise us. Christianity itself, from first to last, was born of drastic, decisive action. Already in the Garden of Eden the tone was set. After man had sinned, God cursed the ground and decisively and mercifully drove mankind from the Garden so that they would not eat of the Tree of Life and live forever in sin. When God saw that the world was too evil to survive, he sent the Flood and began over with Noah and his sons. When God saw that there was no nation suitable to bear the Promised Savior, he called Abram to take drastic action - leave father and mother, house and home, move to an unknown land, and begin a new race. Down through the ages men of God were called upon to take drastic actions, leading finally to the most drastic action of all: God was made man in the person of Jesus Christ, who then offered his life in the death on the cross - all to pay a sin debt that he himself did not owe.

There is nothing whatsoever that is indecisive or halfhearted about any of this. **"God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son..."** Think about that for a moment. There is nothing soft or non-committal in what God has done for us in his Son, Jesus Christ. He sentenced his own Son to pay for our sins with his very life. Because of that, you and I stand holy and righteous in God's sight. Your sins are forgiven – by grace through faith. God grant us the wisdom to recognize and safely distance ourselves from that which can alone destroy the saving faith by which we are saved. Amen.

ESV **Numbers 11:16-17, 24-29** Then the LORD said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them, and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. <sup>17</sup> And I will come down and talk with you there. And I will take some of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you may not bear it yourself alone. <sup>24</sup> ¶ So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD. And he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent. <sup>25</sup> Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied. But they did not continue doing it. <sup>26</sup> ¶ Now two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the Spirit rested on them. They were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. <sup>27</sup> And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." <sup>28</sup> And Joshua the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth, said, "My lord Moses, stop them." <sup>29</sup> But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!"

ESV (**John 10:14-21**) I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup> just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup> And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. <sup>17</sup> For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. <sup>18</sup> No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father." <sup>19</sup> There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. <sup>20</sup> Many of them said, "He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?" <sup>21</sup> Others said, "These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"

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at arm's length

## ST PAUL LUTHERAN CHURCH

BISMARCK, NORTH DAKOTA

# ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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**The 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – September 29, 2024**

## The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

## The Opening Hymn – 28 (Stanzas 1-4) (Red Hymnal)

"Now Let All Loudly Sing Praise"

## The Order of Service – Hymnal page 5ff. (Red Hymnal)

## The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

**The Old Testament Lesson:** (Numbers 11:16-17,24-29) Conservative Christians face many unique challenges, one of which is the temptation to disparage or even attempt to hinder the work of other Christians. God is certainly not pleased with false doctrine in any form, yet it does not lie within our power to know how God will use the work or witness of others to accomplish his divine will. This same thought is expressed by Moses in our first reading. It is helpful to remember our goal, which is that sinners come to know their Savior and to thereby join us in heaven.

**The New Testament Lesson:** (John 10:14-21) Arrogance and pride are crippling sins, and Christians are certainly not immune. It will always be a temptation for conservative Christians to imagine that they are inherently better, or more deserving of God's love and forgiveness, than others. In our second reading, Jesus himself reminds us of his love for all sinners, including those not in our fellowship. We are thereby again reminded that though we cannot join with those who teach contrary to God's Word, we will share heaven with all who trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins.

## The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed (Red Hymnal page 12)

## The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 473 (Stanzas 1-2, 4-5) (Red Hymnal)

"The Church's One Foundation"

## The Sermon - Text: Mark 9:38-50 (Printed on the back page)

**"The Other End of the Arm"**

## "Create In Me" (The Offertory) (Red Hymnal page 12)

## The Post-Sermon Hymn – 535 (Stanzas 1-4, 9) (Red Hymnal)

"Rejoice My Heart, Be Glad and Sing"

## The Prayers

## The Closing Hymn – 28 (Stanza 5) (Red Hymnal)

"Now Let All Loudly Sing Praise"

## Silent Prayer

**Welcome!** - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States and around the world. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again.

## Attendance – Sunday (34) Average (38)

### This Week at St. Paul:

<b>Today</b>	<b>-9:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	<b>-10:00 a.m.</b>	– Worship Service
	<b>-11:00 a.m.</b>	– Fellowship Hour
<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>-6:00 p.m.</b>	– Confirmation Class
	<b>-7:00 p.m.</b>	– Midweek Bible Study
<b>Next Sunday</b>	<b>-9:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	<b>-10:00 a.m.</b>	– Worship Service
	<b>-11:00 a.m.</b>	– Fellowship Hour

**CLC News** – Pastor Zachary Sippert is scheduled to be installed at Grace of Sleepy Eye, MN this afternoon. Pastor Drew Naumann has returned the call to St. Stephen of Mountain View. Pastor James Naumann has accepted the call to serve as vacancy pastor of Zion of Ipswich. Pastor Timothy Daub has accepted the call to serve as vacancy pastor of Redeemer of Bowdle. Pastor Thomas Schuetze has accepted the call to serve as vacancy pastor of Prince of Peace, Loveland, CO. Pastor Ed Starkey, pastor of Our Redeemer's of Red Wing, MN is recovering from a heart attack this past week.

**Victory Over Death** – Mr. Jack Mayhew, who oversaw both the initial construction of our church and parsonage as well as the expansion in 2003, was called suddenly to his Savior's side on Wednesday of this past week. Mr. Mayhew, who is also the grandfather of current St Paul member Hope Meyer, oversaw building projects around the CLC for more than 50 years.

**Upcoming Meetings** – Both the Church Council and the Women's Fellowship are scheduled to meet on Monday, October 7<sup>th</sup> (one week from tomorrow) at 7:00 pm.