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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, Montana
21st Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
Hebrews 4: 12-16; Mark 10:17-31

Let us pray. Grant us, O God, to hear your voice, and in hearing your voice to love your word, and in loving your word to do your will through Christ our Lord. Amen

“Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.” (Hebrews 4:12-16)

This passage from Hebrews perfectly describes the gospel readings we have had the past few weeks. Jesus doesn’t hold anything back as he reveals the true thoughts and intentions of the human heart.

Speaking on Christian community he said, “If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off.”

In response to a question on divorce he replied, “If a [person] divorces his [or her spouse] and marries another, that one commits adultery.”

These are just a couple of the sharp words we’ve heard over the past couple of Sundays.

Did Jesus really mean that we should cut off a limb when we stray from the path of faith? Are we really supposed to marry just once and then never remarry if divorce happens? I invite you to check out those sermons on the church website if you missed them.

Today Jesus says to a young man seeking the path to eternal life, “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” Does Jesus really ask him to sell EVERYTHING and give ALL his money to the poor?

“Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword.”

Notice that Jesus asks the young man about the commandments that address our relationships with our neighbors—you shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, or defraud your neighbor, and you shall honor your father and mother.

The young man is convinced that he has kept all these since his youth. In the Small Catechism Luther takes us back into the scriptures to show how Jesus expands these commandments beyond their surface meanings. Anger toward our neighbor, a wandering eye toward someone other than our spouse, gossip, and dishonor of anyone in a position of authority are included in the meanings of these commandments.

Nobody’s perfect, so the first thing to notice in this conversation with Jesus is that the young man is probably not being fully honest with himself about having obeyed all these commandments.

These commandments related to life with our neighbors can become a checklist or scorecard by which we judge ourselves and one another. Some use them to determine who is in and who is out in the kingdom of God. Maybe that’s how this man viewed them, too.

Jesus' next words cut to heart of the matter when he tells the man to sell everything and give the money to the poor. With this instruction he turns the man's heart to his relationship with God.

Remember the first commandment? You shall have no other gods or make for yourself any idols. The man's wealth has become an idol and Jesus' words reveal that the man's relationship with God had suffered because of his focus on his wealth.

The Commandments are given by God as a gift to us, to help us, to form us as God's holy and beloved people who are meant to share the love of God with others. But Jesus teaches us today that the Commandments in and of themselves do not save us.

So how do we respond to Jesus' instruction for the young man? Can we hear it as a word for us, too?

The challenge in determining which things have become idols for us is to consider how devoted we are to them. Possessions, work, hobbies, and even our families can take priority over our relationship with God. The ways we spend our time, attention, skills, and resources reflect our faith in God to be God for us—or not.

Since Jesus brings up the topic of possessions, let's talk about money or wealth for a moment. In this country is it easy to feel like we are not wealthy if we are not millionaires or if we don't have the same luxuries as some of our neighbors. But when we look at wealth from a global perspective, if we have a roof over our heads and can feed our families, we are wealthy.

It is tempting to hold on to our money for fear of not having enough. It is tempting to spend it on things that make us feel secure or that satisfy some craving. If money holds power for us or is used to comfort or satisfy our desires of the heart, then money has become an idol for us.

The structure of our denomination, the ELCA, states that active members attend worship and give financially at least once a year. Now why would we say that? First, worship is important! God commands it in the third Commandment, to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy, because it is here in worship that we encounter God's word for us, even when that word is difficult to hear.

Financial giving is usually the more difficult topic. Does the church need your money? Well, yes. If you want the lights and heat turned on when you arrive for worship, the bulletins to be prepared and printed, and toilet paper in the restrooms, then yes, the church needs money.

But financial giving to the church is also a spiritual practice that is a way for us to participate in the ministry and mission of God. It is an act of thanksgiving for what God has given us—the capabilities and the opportunity to work and make money.

Giving is also an act of trust. We trust that God will provide what we need with what is left after we give our offerings. And we trust that the church will use our offerings to further the kingdom of God here and around the world.

Does this word sound sharp like a two-edged sword? If we are not “laid bare” in the presence of God, we are not open to God transforming our hearts to bring new life in our relationship with God and our relationships with one another—and even in our relationship with our possessions.

Recognizing and naming the idols in our lives can bring us to the kind of despair the young man and the disciples felt, leading us to ask with them, “Then who can be saved?” Brothers and sisters, hear again Jesus’ words of salvation for them and for us: “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

The writer of Hebrews also brings this good news: Jesus, the Son of God, is our great high priest, the one who has paved the way for our salvation. Jesus sympathizes with our weaknesses—like our temptations to make our own idols. “[H]e has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

We might feel drawn to despair that we cannot live up to the life of faith and obedience God calls us to live. Let us instead hold fast to our confession that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ our salvation that brings eternal life is God’s work in us and for us.

May God’s word for us today be a word that both pierces our hearts and opens us to the transforming power of God’s grace and mercy.

Thanks be to God! Amen