

September 29, 2024  
Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost

“Lord of the Dance”

Mark 9:38-50

Maybe it’s because I watched way too many movies in my youth, but as I was researching and pondering today’s Gospel lesson, what came to my mind was the question the Joker asks Bruce Wayne in the older Batman movie right before shooting him, “You ever dance with the devil in the pale moonlight?”

Weird, I know. But it came to mind because I think Christians sometimes are willing to dance with temptation, thinking that they can do so but somehow skirt the actual sin. Folks think they can talk in hushed tones about someone else and not slide into gossip and slander. Men think they can gaze at provocative images of alluring young women and not fall into lust. People think they can righteously hold a grudge without sliding into sinful anger, hatred and unforgiveness.

I mean, close your eyes and think of that particular sin or sins with which you personally struggle repeatedly. Does it just come up and grab you out of nowhere, or do you somehow flirt with it, allowing yourself to get close but maybe fooling yourself into thinking this time you’ll somehow avoid it? Do you ever dance with the devil in the pale moonlight?

Jesus clearly tells us—don’t dance with Satan! Note the progression of the body parts getting cut off in Jesus’ strong hyperbole in today’s Gospel lesson. *“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. 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. 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, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.”* The hand—the member that actually sins. But also the foot, the member that travels toward the sin. The eye—the member that identifies the temptation to the sin. By the strongest language possible Jesus is urging us to avoid not just the sin, but the paths we follow that lead to the sin; to avoid dancing with it at all.

You can hear this simply as “Stop sinning because it leads to hell,” but that really misses the point. Jesus is still talking to His disciples about discipleship, and He is calling on those who would follow Him to take serious action to shun sin at every level of its temptation. But because He is addressing disciples, believers, what ultimately is the starting point for this action? It is the forgiveness of sins we possess in the very Son of God we follow!

You are here because you know Jesus of Nazareth is the divine God who joined with our human flesh in Mary’s womb in order to be a brother to all humanity, and later die in that humanity to pay the full penalty for all sin, and then rose in that humanity the firstfruits of our human resurrection to eternal life. Apart from Christ we stood in Satan’s kingdom, but Jesus cut-in, if you will, cut into our very humanity and took us as His partner to dance forever in paradise.

There is your starting point people. This fight is not about “How I resist temptation and sin.” It is about “To whom do I belong? With whom am I intent on dancing in life?”

Dancing is not a bad metaphor for the Christian life. By Holy Baptism the Holy Spirit has made you a new man or woman, solidly in the loving embrace of you Savior as a gift of grace. He is the groom, His church is His bride, and we dance together. We are His and He is ours.

Keeping that image in mind, ponder what Jesus says in the Gospel. Does the eye wander toward another dance partner? Do the feet walk away? Does the hand release that of Christ and reach for another? Do we dance with the devil in the pale moonlight? No! We don't.

You see, it is not just you and sin in a battle. It is you in Christ's arms forever, and Satan, the world and the sinful flesh trying to get you to let go of Him. Set this idea in your mind. Be in the practice of seeing this image especially in the face of temptation. If you see it as "me against sin" you've put yourself in peril because you're all alone on the dance floor. Rightly seeing yourself as one with Christ, you stand redeemed and holy, unfit for any other partner other than the King of Kings.

Use this right image of your Christian reality to spur on the practice of shunning temptation at every step, becoming better and better in the practice of not simply resisting the sin, but of avoiding coming close to its orbit by not even entertaining its possibility as you cling to your Savior. If you see opportunity for sin, look away by looking toward Jesus. If you find yourself in proximity to sin, walk away by mentally walking toward Jesus. If you catch yourself in the midst of sin, let go of it and grab on to your Savior in repentance, knowing He is eager to receive you, forgive you, and continue dancing once more toward the completion of His kingdom.

And there is another reason to practice this other than the very good reason of avoiding you own condemnation. Remember what prefaced Christ's exhortation to His disciples. He spoke about the little ones, like the child he brought in the midst of them in at the beginning of this teaching in last Sunday's Gospel. He uses harsh language, "*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 then He goes into the chopping off of limbs talk.

Other disciples can see you dancing, who you're dancing with, and this has an influence and carries consequences. Jesus is obviously talking about little children who believe, but I think He also has in mind those believers who are weak children in the faith and taking queues from your example.

You see, dancing generally isn't a personal, isolated thing. It's done publicly, and if it's appealing, others join in. While it's quite obvious that disciples should never tempt others toward sin, the cause of another's sin might not be your temptation, but your example. We have a fallen nature that finds dancing with the devil in the pale moonlight very appealing. A little one in the faith may see your practice of sin as a tacit approval to follow you there.

Likewise, when your life is boldly entwined with Christ it is a proclamation of His Gospel good news, strengthening the weak by example, encouraging them to also shun temptation and cling to the Savior. As Christ's church, the aim of each one of us is always to dance with Him beautifully, to His glory and for the upbuilding of the whole.

These are some of the most brutal words spoken by Jesus in the Holy Gospels for good reason. They should be. He condemns dancing with the devil in the pale moonlight. Ultimately He is the very judge of all, condemning those who cling to sin's embrace.

Yet He speaks these to disciples, those who believe and follow, and thus have been sanctified and made holy to dwell with Him and dance as His eternal bride. Remember this always and strive to, with your eyes, your feet, your hands, dance this earthly life with Him to His glory and thus dance with Him forevermore.

Amen.