

Sermon for Proper 21, Year B

The Text: Mark 9:38-50

Think for a moment about something that's very precious to you.

It can be anything –just spend a few moments trying to think of something that you have, something in your life, that is the definition of the word “precious”, for you!

Are you thinking of a family member, or a friend? A wedding ring, or a family heirloom?

What's something that's just so precious to you? What's something that you'd absolutely hate to lose?

Now consider that YOU are infinitely more precious to God than that thing is to you!

We are so precious to God! That's why Jesus humbly serves us!

Jesus came in humility, as a little baby, to keep the law perfectly for us! He lived a life of perfect love, and in humility He laid down His life for us on the Cross – dying the worst of deaths to take the full punishment for our sin! He rose again from the dead – destroying the power of sin, death, and Satan in our life!

He comes humbly today to serve us through His word, and in a simple meal, to cleanse us from guilt and shame and fill us with His life and love!

God gives us faith by the Holy Spirit, and connects you to Himself. He unites Himself with us – that's how precious we are to Him! That's how much God loves us! God serves us to assure us that we're forgiven and He's with us, granting us peace and favour and blessing and life eternal!

Jesus says: *“If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all”*.

He modelled that and still models that perfectly!

In the Gospel reading for today Jesus makes it clear that the most humble, the most unassuming believer, bears Christ!

We are not only precious – but the gift of faith that connects us to God and unites you with God is also a precious gift! When we look at a little child who has no works of his or her own – nothing impressive about themselves– but simply has faith in Jesus, we are to see Jesus in that child!

“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me”.

Every believer is precious to God! Every believer is connected to God, united to Him, through the precious gift of faith!

So God humbly serves us!

Something that God does, in service to us, is warn us about the seriousness of sin. Jesus says: *“If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around their neck”.*

Jesus is not literally advocating self-mutilation. We are not to actually cut off our hands or pluck out our eyes. But he is warning us and wanting us to see the graphic consequence of willingly continuing in sin and warning against anything that could cause a believer to lose the precious gift of faith – and so end up in hell.

Perhaps we could paraphrase: ‘Hell is real! Don't mess with your own faith or the faith of another! If your hand causes you to have doubts and lose the faith cut it off! That's better than going to hell! If your foot causes you to have doubts and lose faith cut it off! That's better than going to hell! If your eye causes you to have doubts and lose faith pluck it out! That's better than going to hell!’

Jesus is wanting us to not take our faith lightly. It's more precious than anything else that we have—and to be very careful that we not do anything that will cause another to lose their faith!

Yes, God preserves us in the faith! God keeps serving us because we're precious to Him and He wants us to stay in the faith which is so precious. But don't take things lightly!

If our work, or our hobbies, or our family, or anything else is getting in the way of God's service to you, if anything has the potential to hurt your faith or the faith of another precious believer—then we need to reassess our priorities, to fear, love and trust God above anything else.

God does not want you to have anything else in place of him because he wants to continually serve you. So draw near to him through His humble word and

Sacrament because you're precious to Him and He wants to keep your precious faith strong!

As you do this you'll find yourself serving others, and in doing so, serving Christ. If it's just giving a believer a simple cup of water, a quiet word of encouragement—that's valued by God!

Jesus humbly serves us and enables us to serve one another. Even the most humble service is important because the believer who is served is connected to Jesus and is SO precious!

It's really important that we don't take lightly anything that could cause us, or anyone else, to lose confidence in God and His promises – and so reject the precious gift of faith and wind up in hell! We are often tempted to think – this is okay, I can do this or go along with that, I still believe in Jesus! That command of the Lord doesn't really matter so much because I still believe!

I think the words of St Paul to young pastor Timothy are recorded for our benefit too: *"Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers"*.

I think the words of St Paul to young pastor Titus can be applied to us too: *"Hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that you can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it."*

And we need to always consider what St Paul wrote to the church in Corinth: *"I appeal to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought"*.

Above all – when we're tempted to think that some things we might do aren't that important, some sins are nothing to worry about, as long as I believe in Jesus – remember what Jesus tells us: *"If you love me, you will obey what I command"...* *"you are my friends if you do what I command"*.

It is absolutely true that we're saved by grace through faith – not obedience – but that doesn't give us license to take sin and disobedience lightly.

The God who lovingly serves us calls us to watch ourselves, to take sin and error seriously, so that we let nothing jeopardise our salvation or the salvation of others, through offending them and their confidence in the truth!

But know this for sure: God does have mercy on us sinners! Now that is such good news to hear, because we know in the struggle against sin, we regularly fail. In Matthew 15 Jesus says that the problem of sin is one of the heart. It is what comes out of a heart that makes a person unclean...so even if we could cut off our hands and pluck out our eyes, it wouldn't actually stop sinful thoughts and motives that come out of the heart.

But Jesus has come to serve us, when we were not ready to serve him. He came and washed us by water and the word and gave us a new heart, making us pure with his own holiness. That's what he continues to do every time we receive his holy and precious body and blood in the sacrament.

And he still serves us as his baptised people in this congregation, so that by his grace he enables us to be at peace with one another – seeing Jesus in one another and serving us as he speaks to us through his word, to strengthen our faith, the gift of which is precious beyond measure—and a gift that he has given to you. Through this precious gift God declares us holy and righteous as if we had lived as perfectly as Jesus himself! Amen!