

**The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**September 26-27, 2015**  
**Mark 9:38-50**

*“All of Life: All or Nothing”*

We've all heard the old phrase, "It's all or nothing," which means that if we're not in something to give 100%, then it's best not to be involved at all. Better to give your whole heart than to be half-hearted. And this is what Jesus is telling us in today's Gospel lesson. His words may make us uncomfortable and uneasy; we may find ourselves squirming at what he is saying to us. Cut off your hand or foot if it causes you to sin? Pluck out your eye if it leads you astray? Yikes! Let's see if we can unpack what Jesus is telling us and with the help of the Holy Spirit apply it to our own lives today. Today we begin a Fall Stewardship series, entitled "All of Life," and so the message this day, based on the Gospel lesson, is entitled, "All or Nothing." May the Lord's rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus' sake.

If we're going to understand what Jesus is talking about here in today's Gospel lesson, we have to get at the context of what is going on – the bigger picture. In chapters 8, 9 and 10 of Mark's Gospel, Jesus makes three "passion predictions" of his impending suffering, death, and resurrection (8:31, 9:30-31, and 10:32-34). After each passion prediction, there follows misunderstanding on the part of the disciples about what this means. And so each time, Jesus then had to correct their misunderstanding. Prediction, misunderstanding, correction – three times in three chapters. Today's Gospel lesson is part of the correction that Jesus gives his disciples after his second passion prediction. Just prior to this, the disciples were caught up in a heated discussion about who was the greatest (9:33ff.). Really? That's what we heard last Sunday in the Gospel lesson. And now, John gets all worked up because there is some unknown individual casting out demons in Jesus' name. It's an unauthorized use of power! He's not one of "us," John is saying, but really, John is speaking for all the disciples. John's words are revealing: **“Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us”** (Mark 9:38). Us – not necessarily Jesus, but "us." Isn't that sometimes our problem also? We're more concerned about "us" than Jesus. Earlier in chapter 9, the disciples couldn't bring healing to a boy with an unclean spirit (9:14ff.), but here is this unknown exorcist doing the very thing they could not – all in Jesus' name. Like Moses in the Old Testament lesson (Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29), Jesus' response is one of tolerance: **“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. For the one who is not against us is for us”** (Mark 9:39-40). "Jesus opposed the narrow exclusivism of the Twelve with an open and generous spirit" (*The Gospel According to Mark*, William L. Lane. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974; p. 343). An "all of life" perspective means that God's kingdom is much broader than we often think, pushing past our narrow boundaries. Even something as ordinary as giving a cup of cold water to someone who belongs to Jesus serves his kingdom purpose: "... there are no distinctions between 'trivial' and 'important' tasks. There is only faith and obedience, shown in devotion to Jesus..." (Ibid, p. 345).

That "all of life" perspective leads to "all or nothing" discipleship with what Jesus says next. All causes of sin are to be ripped out by the roots from the lives of God's people: tie a big old millstone around the neck of anyone who leads others astray and throw 'em into the sea. Cut off your hand or foot if it causes you to sin. Pluck out your eye if it causes offense. Better to enter life maimed than to be thrown whole-bodied into hell. And this is where the "rubber hits the road," so to speak. We try to play both sides here. We want to have our cake and eat it, too. We say we want to follow Jesus, but we want to hold on to those pet sins in our lives, whatever they may be, whether by hand, foot, eye or something else. We don't want to give them up. We say we want to follow Jesus, but instead of offering up ourselves in joyful response to all that God in Christ has done for us, we cling tightly to the things of this world. Jesus tells us: you can't have it both ways. Now, Jesus is not demanding physical self-mutilation, but in the strongest

manner possible He calls for costly sacrifice on our part. “Whatever in one’s life tempts one to be untrue to God must be discarded, promptly and decisively, even as a surgeon amputates a hand or a leg in order to save a life” (Ibid, p. 348). This all-or-nothing sacrifice of whatever holds us back from the kingdom of God and from following Jesus is carried a step further. Every disciple is to be a living sacrifice for God (Romans 12:1-2), so that our entire life – in thought, word, and deed – becomes a living witness to God. Sacrifices in the Old Testament included salt (Leviticus 2:13; Ezekiel 43:24; Exodus 30:35). **“For everyone will be salted with fire,”** Jesus tells us (Mark 9:49). This salt-sacrifice image reminds us that as believers we may experience “fiery trials” (1 Peter 1:7; 4:12) through which God refines, purifies, and strengthens our faith, purging those things in our lives that are contrary to God’s will for us.

We may be thinking if this is what “all or nothing” is like, then “I’m all about nothing.” We may be thinking: that’s over the top for me. I cannot live up to those expectations. And so, like the rich young man (Mark 10:17-22) we sigh deeply and turn away, downcast and dejected. But wait! The very One who calls us to such radical discipleship is the same One who demonstrated an “all or nothing” love for each one of us. Jesus gave all that He had for us – enduring betrayal and rejection, the agony of the cross and abandonment by his own Father – all for us. Jesus suffered, died, and rose again in order to redeem us and make us his own. The price He paid was not in gold or silver, stocks or bonds, but with his very life blood, with his innocent suffering and death (1 Peter 1:18-19). The gift of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation that Jesus gives comes to you freely. It has all been paid for you by Jesus, and it cannot be purchased or bought. It is not earned or deserved. It can only be received by faith. This is the radical, all-or-nothing grace of God in Jesus Christ that calls each one of us from death to life, opening our eyes to see all of life as God’s gift to be managed in such a way that the Lord is glorified and the lives of others are blessed.

All of life stewardship is rooted in thankfulness – in seeing and rejoicing in what God has given us. We see a picture of what this does not look like in today’s Old Testament lesson as God’s people could only see what they did not have. Thankfulness begins with seeing what God has given us. All of life stewardship can only come as a grateful response to the all-or-nothing gift of God’s love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ. All of life stewardship isn’t about what I can do for God, but what God in Christ has already done for me. All of life stewardship sees “our time, our possessions, and our selves not as things we own, but as that which belongs to God.” All of life stewardship sees “our calling [is] to help each believer grow in a life-style and world-view that are Christ-like, honoring the Lord with our whole life.” In all of life stewardship, “we joyfully return to God everything He has put into our hands – all that we are and have,” using our God-given talents and abilities in ways that will be a blessing to people inside and outside our congregation.” All of life stewardship “is the free and joyous activity of the child of God and God’s family, the church, in managing all of life and life’s resources for God’s purposes.”

May God help us live out this truth not only with our lips, but with our lives, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.