

## And Like A Good Lutheran...

**James 5:13-20 and Mark 9:38-50 | Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost |  
September 29, 2024 | John Klawiter, preaching**

Grace and peace to you my friends in Christ,

Earlier this week, I was on a run around a neighborhood lake. I was enjoying this beautiful weather on my day off. As I ran along the shoulder, a pair of bikes were riding towards me.

This is not abnormal on this lake—bikes go by all the time and they're great about moving over. I head to one side of the shoulder and they go to the other side.

As these bikes came towards me, the lead bike moved over... but as the trailing bike got closer, it drifted to my side of the shoulder, even though there weren't any cars near us.

I couldn't move any further to the side without falling into the ditch, so I had to take a little side-step and ran into a tree branch. I was lucky I didn't tumble off the road.

As I regained my footing, I let out a nice, passive aggressive Minnesotan "thanks"—but the bicyclist had already moved on, clearly not caring.

I was ticked. So, as I continued my run, I kept thinking about what happened and was frustrated that this bicycle etiquette had disrupted my good vibes from my run.

What if I'd let that negative moment carryover into how I talked to others or treated people?

Do you know people who knock you down or drag you through their drama? Does it make you feel anxious, even if the energy being unloaded on you isn't about you?

Or what about someone who gets in your head? They can make you feel inadequate, unwelcome, just by their mere presence?

It's amazing how much influence other people can negatively have on us, oftentimes subconsciously—we might not even realize it's happening.

But it doesn't have to be that way.

Steven Covey, in his famous 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, refers to this as "Carrying our own weather"—it's central to his first habit to Be Proactive.

**Covey says, "Don't allow highly emotional people to suck you into the vortex [of their storm]. Not every conversation necessitates an immediate response from you. Sometimes a simple "Thank you for sharing" is enough.**

## Sermon Transcript

**Remember that you are your own meteorologist. If you don't like the weather, change it.**

When it comes to the topic of “hell”, it sure feels the weather is Phoenix in August and the air conditioner is broken. Can we really carry our own weather when it comes to THAT place?

It's strange to talk about hell.

Does Jesus even talk about it? It sure sounded like it from the reading we just heard.

It's helpful if I remind you the setting because the last three weeks have all been a build-up within the same series of conversations between Jesus and his disciples.

It began with a shocking affirmation from Jesus that yes, in fact, he's the Messiah—but this was a short-lived moment of bliss when the disciples hear the first foreshadowing of his death.

When Peter gets reprimanded for telling Jesus that Messiah's live, not die, he's told “Get behind me Satan!”

But then, as if all is forgiven, Jesus takes James, John, and even Peter, up the mountain where he's Transfigured—a God-moment—as he glows dazzling white while Elijah and Moses appear.

It's like they're on the brink of heaven, but only get a glimpse, before the moment is over and they continue on their earthly journey alongside Jesus.

And that's where today's conversation takes place. A continuation of the conversation from last week—a when Jesus told the disciples not to argue over who is the greatest, but instead to be servants.

It's through being last, that the disciples will be first.

Then, for dramatic effect, Jesus takes a young child in his lap and says “whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me.” Humble yourself. This kingdom of God is not for the select few, but it's open for all Creation to participate in.

So there we are. Jesus is still holding this child, when John tells him that someone is casting out demons in Jesus' name, but he wasn't one of them. John says they told him to stop it.

Jesus, again, corrects him. If he's not against us, he's for us. He's trying to cast out demons for the right reason, so why try to prevent it? This is a good thing.

And so, we get this series of harsh images—if you cause this little child in Jesus' lap to sin, here's what could happen.

## Sermon Transcript

Jesus is saying that if the disciples are the ones bringing about darkness, or separation from God, or that they contribute to someone with good intentions being turned away from God and towards selfish ways, that these are the things you should do as a response.

Go to Gehenna—literally the fiery inferno city dump on the outskirts of town—and if it's your hand or foot or eye that did the sinning, toss it into the dump. Jesus, tongue in cheek, points out how absurd this is.

Jesus is NOT saying this is a place for people to go because they couldn't stop sinning! Seriously, if that's what hell is, it would be packed and we'd all be there.

But Jesus dies on the cross—saves us from our sins—so that we don't have to worry about where we'll be spending eternity. That grace is secure.

So why does this burning imagery come up? What's the point Jesus is trying to make?

Jesus has just corrected the disciples in three different things:

1. **Telling Jesus not to face the death on the cross.**
2. **Arguing about who is the best disciple to take over.**
3. **Preventing others from doing good if they're not doing it with Jesus.**

Jesus is trying so hard to get them to see what the kingdom is all about! It's about sacrifice. Service. It's about an expansive, larger circle of welcome—inclusive of people not immediately thought to be “chosen” or on in the inside.

Jesus is changing the way they think. Not to scare them into good behavior. Not to tell them that if you make a mistake, eternal fire and punishment awaits.

No. It's the opposite.

He's showing them life separated from the love of Christ is hell on earth.

Rob Bell, in his book *Love Wins*, points out that **“Jesus did not use hell to try and compel “heathens” and “pagans” to believe in God so they wouldn't burn when they die. He talked about hell to very religious people to warn them about the consequences of straying from their God-given calling and identity to show the world God's love.”**

Ah... so if the purpose of our lives is to show God's love, why don't we just do it? How could we possibly say no to this invitation?

Bell knows it's not that easy.

## Sermon Transcript

*“I see this every day, and so do you. People choose to live in their own hells all the time. We do it every time we isolate ourselves, give the cold shoulder to someone who has slighted us, every time we hide knives in our words, every time we harden our hearts in defiance of what we know to be the loving, good, and right thing to do. We see people choose another way all the time. That impulse lurks in all of us.*

Some Christian traditions want you to believe that God is judging our every move—ready to condemn, ready to scold, ready to cast aside. Instead of asking if that’s what God wants, Bell asks whether we get what we want.

His conclusion?

*Yes, we do get what we want. God is that loving. If we want isolation, despair, and the right to be our own god, God graciously grants us that option. If we insist on using our God-given power and strength to make the world in our own image, God allows us that freedom. The more we want nothing to do with all God is, the more distance and space are created. If we don’t want love, we are given a reality free from love.*

*But... If we crave light and are drawn to the truth and are desperate for grace, God gives us what we want.*

Bell is right. He’s on to something with Jesus. And sometimes those messages can be received in the strangest of ways.

About a mile after I’d been knocked off the side of the road on my run, I had ANOTHER encounter with a bike (**PICTURE of bike/lake**).



This time, as the man approached from over my shoulder, I turned to look at him. He reached out a hand and said, **“God’s blessings on your day.”**

As a good Lutheran, my natural reaction was, **“And also with you.”**

Wow, what a difference this made for the rest of my run. The rest of my day. The rest of my week. The end of my sermon. I didn’t have to dwell in anger. I could choose peace.

His words of blessing redirected my energy. He turned me back to what matters. The light of Christ. The blessings of God that I had turned from. The promise that I get to choose love.



## Sermon Transcript

We'll be faced with evil—later today, or at work, or when talking to someone who doesn't extend grace. Satan, in his many ways of tempting us—will tempt us in ways that feel, sound, and look so good. Change the weather.

Choose God. Choose light. Choose love. God's Blessings on your day. And also with you. Amen.