CUT AWAY THE DEATH TRAPS

1. By fighting party pride that looks down on others
2. By fighting what draws your heart into sin
3. As God's Word salts you

We have all seen old-fashioned mouse traps. It is just a piece of wood and some twisted metal. But how deadly for a curious mouse! With the trigger set, it only takes a nudge or a lick, and snap! That is the end of the mouse. It is a death trap.

That is the picture behind the word Jesus uses when he talks about causing someone to sin in the text. A death trap for faith is triggered. The Greek word is σκανδαλίζω (skandalizo). The believer is scandalized into turning away from Jesus into unbelief. It is a matter of life and death. The old King James Version used the word offend here. But that does not cut it with our current meaning of offend. Jesus is not talking about hurting someone's feelings. He is talking about killing faith, triggering a death trap.

We certainly do not want to be the trap that kills someone else's faith. And we certainly do not want to be a mouse triggering a death trap for our own faith. So cut away the death traps. That is the theme to keep in mind. Through God's Word may the Holy Spirit strengthen you and me to cut away the death traps so that we do no harm to the faith of others or to our own faith.

As we begin, let's catch up with the flow of what is happening. Last week in the Gospel from Mark 9, the disciples had argued about which of them was the greatest. Jesus confronted that sinful pride in them. He told them: If anyone wants to be first, he will be the last of all and the servant of all. Then he took a little child in his arms and said: Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me.

John had taken Jesus' words to heart. He recalled how he had recently acted unwelcoming toward someone driving out demons in Jesus' name. Were he and the others wrong to try to stop that man or was that a different situation? Jesus answers: Do not try to stop him... whoever is not against us is for us.

They are many details here we would like to know but are not told. We do not have time to go into the different possibilities. So let's focus on the sin that Jesus brings out here, the sin that can also so easily infect you and me and lead us to be a death trap for someone else. What is that sin? Party pride. That partisanship that thinks we are better just because of the group we belong to.

So the disciples struggled, not only with personal pride, arguing which of them was the greatest, but also with party pride. They were proud that they were part of that group, that party of people, who spent each day in Jesus' physical presence. What right did this outsider have to drive out demons in Jesus' name? Wasn't that a right Jesus had given only to them, to their group?

But just because this man was not part of the disciples' special group, did not mean he did not believe in Jesus. The very fact that this man trusted Jesus' name so much that he used it to drive out demons brought glory to Jesus at this time. Just because he was not with the 12 disciples, did not mean that he was against Jesus. Whoever is not against us is for us.

Now, do not misuse those words as an excuse for spiritual laziness. Do not think to yourself: As long as I am not actively opposing Jesus, I must be OK. So I can coast along in my faith since if I am not against him, I must be for him. That is not what Jesus said and that is not the situation he is addressing.

When it comes to your own personal relationship with Jesus, then Jesus says: Whoever is not with me is against me. If you or I are not actively following Jesus, then we are working against him. There is no idling in place or coasting along. However, when we are looking out at someone else, as John was doing in this context, then just because that other person has not
joined with us, does not mean they are against Jesus. **Whoever is not against us is for us.** Do you see the different situation?

And when a person is for Jesus, that faith will show itself. Jesus makes that clear. Faith shows itself, maybe not in acts like driving out demons, but maybe in the simple act of giving a cup of water to a fellow follower of Jesus. Jesus is not describing simply an act of human sympathy or humanitarian aid. Even unbelievers do such things. But notice how Jesus says that this person does it **in my name, because you belong to Christ.** It is an act of faith that trusts in Jesus' name and what it means and stands beside his followers.

Now would we want our party pride to snuff out that person's faith, to push him away from Jesus, to snap down on him like a death trap? Of course not! That is why Jesus warns us of how serious that is. Rather than killing the faith of a little one, whether a child or someone young in the faith, it would be better for our own life to be horribly ended with a heavy millstone dragging us to the bottom of the ocean.

We have the blessing of being part of a group, a congregation and church body, that is close to Jesus and centered on his truth. What a great blessing that is! But like John we face the temptation of thinking that if someone is not with us, they must be against Jesus. How often aren't we guilty of party pride! It is so easy to think that we have the clear teaching of God's truth among us, because we are better that others. But we have his truth only because of God's mercy.

Fight against such party pride, for neither you nor I want to drive another believer away from Christ. We do not want to be a death trap for them. The Holy Spirit powerfully works wherever the Gospel is proclaimed, that Good News of Jesus, our divine Savior, the Good News that he was crucified for all the sins of the world and rose from the dead to bring eternal life, the Good News that this is all a free gift from God received by faith alone, apart from works, the Good News that he did all this for guilty sinners, yes even for you and me. We rejoice that this Good News brings faith to the hearts of people even if they do not belong to our congregation or our sister congregations.

Now does this mean we join in with any and every church that has the Gospel somewhere, even if it is mixed with unbiblical teachings? Do we join them in prayer and worship and Communion as if all churches were the same? No, that would be laying a different kind of death trap for them. Just as we rejoice when the gospel truth creates faith, so also we mourn when error and falsehood are mixed with God's truth. To pray or worship or commune with those who join themselves with false teachings confirms them in their error. We rejoice as long as faith is still in their hearts, but we must also warn with our words and actions that they are endangering their faith with the false teachings of the church they have joined. Any false doctrine is such a serious death trap that the Bible calls it **gangrene.**

We pray that Jesus would forgive us for our party pride. May we rejoice that he's called many to faith who are not outwardly joined with us. May he keep us from laying the death trap of party pride and also the death trap of condoning false teachings. For we do not want any falling away because of us.

Now Jesus turns from warning us against laying death traps for others and warns us against laying death traps for ourselves.

This is a very serious matter, a matter of life and death, heaven and hell. Three times Jesus mentions hell. He describes hell as **unquenchable fire.** He quotes from the prophet Isaiah, **Where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.** Imagine your body continually decaying with maggots crawling in and out, but you are still alive and feeling it all. Imagine the horror of your flesh burning, the putrid stench, the searing pain. And it just goes on and on and on. You never go unconscious. Unending torture. Hell is worse. All those stories of people selling their souls, or making a deal with the devil, or out fiddling him, only belittle how horrible hell is.

Is any earthly gain or glory, any amount of health or wealth or pleasure, even the greatest fame and fortune - is any of it worth an eternity in hell? Is it even worthy a day in hell? No! Not at
all. Is anything or anyone in this life so dear, so precious, so cherished that it's worth holding on to, even if it is dragging us into hell? Certainly not! Even losing a hand or foot or eye is well worth it, if that would keep us out of hell.

But would cutting off a hand, a foot, or an eye really save us from hell? No. We still have another hand, foot, or eye to keep on sinning with. The death trap lies much deeper. It is in our very heart and soul. A few chapters back Jesus said: **From within, out of people's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual sins, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, unrestrained immorality, envy, slander, arrogance, and foolishness.** Death traps are what lead our hearts into sin.

Cut away the death traps. Flee temptation. Run away from sin. If that movie, TV program, book, magazine, friend, neighbor, job, hobby, sport, or activity is leading your heart away from Christ and into sin, cut it away. It is a death trap. It is not worth it. It will not bring you true happiness, but rather in the end only hell.

Yet the root of the problem is not those things outside of us, is it? Many things in this world push our hearts along in sin (so avoid them), but even cutting ourselves off from everything will not make our hearts better. So is the fire of hell the only future in front of us?

No, dear friends, not at all! Do not despair. Jesus speaks of another fire, not a fire that torments, but a fire that is like salt. It purifies and preserves. **Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good. But if the salt loses its flavor, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.**

What is that which can penetrate to the very depths of our heart and soul cutting away the death trap within us? What is the salt the kills the bacteria of sin and preserves us for eternal life? What alone can purify our hearts, sanctifying us, making us pure and holy before God? What is the salt?

Listen to what Jesus says in his prayer in John 17: **Sanctify them by the truth. Your Word is truth.** God's Word is the salt that penetrates your hearts to sanctify you so that those death traps are cut away and instead you, dear friends, are set apart for God. God's Word alone purifies and preserves us for eternal life. For God's Word in Scripture and in the Sacraments brings you Jesus and his blood that was shed for you. **The blood of Jesus Christ, his son, cleanses us from all sin.**

Have this salt in yourself, dear friends. Keep God's Word active in your heart. Do not lose the saltiness by neglecting God's Word. Have God's Word within you. Have salt in yourselves.

And as that Word lives in us, we are able to live at peace with one another. Instead of party pride laying death traps for others, we share the peace of Christ with one another. We live at peace, for Jesus has brought you and me his peace. Through his death he reconciled you to God. Be at peace. Even the deepest, darkest sin within your heart, the blood of Jesus purifies. You have peace. The peace of forgiveness. The peace of eternal life, which no hell can rob from you. Peace with God. The peace we share with each other as God's Word salts our hearts. Amen.

Pastor Keith Bilitz
St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Alma City
Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church, Smiths Mill