

Brothers and sisters of St. Jude – let me, Paul, your brother in Christ -- start by just repeating what the great prophet John the Baptist said today in the Gospel of Matthew: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Repent: I know you have heard the word many times before – but have you ever taken the time to find out what it means? To repent -- means to feel remorse or regret--- for what one has done or has failed to do. It has its origin in a Latin word which simply means: to be sorry.

So it closely tied with another word you are used to hearing ---- sin – so let’s talk about sin for a bit, although no one probably wants to do that. . .

When you listen to people these days no one steals any more. . . they simply lift something.

No one lies any more. . . they simply misrepresent the facts.

No one commits adultery. . . they simply fool around.

And no one kills an unborn baby. . . they simply terminate a pregnancy.

This way of talking is simply a clever, if not a dishonest way, of candy-coating the reality of sin. And sin is not something that should be candy-coated!

The concept of sin –when seen through the eyes of biblical writers is simply “missing the mark:” -- as when one is shooting an arrow at a target and misses – they miss the mark. The mark that you are supposed to be hitting with greater and greater accuracy throughout your life – is the mark of Jesus Christ – he sets the standard, we are to follow in his footsteps, and when we don’t talk or act like Jesus – we miss the mark – we sin.

Many people think that our spiritual maturity is measured by the amount of biblical information or doctrine one knows, or how often they are seen in Church.

While all of that is important – it isn’t the whole story.

The Christian life is far more than creeds and convictions – it includes conduct and character. As Christians, our deeds must be consistent with our creeds – and our beliefs must be backed up with Christ-like behavior.

Christianity is not just a religion or a philosophy – but a relationship and a way of life. And at the core of this way of life is thinking and acting like Jesus. When we don’t do that – we miss the mark – we sin.

So how do we know what to do as Christians? Well, that’s why you come to Church Sunday after Sunday – to be schooled in the ways of Christ:

To listen to his word,

To be transformed by consuming his body and blood.

To be strengthened by those who gather with you ---

So all of you can leave from this place renewed and recharged to live like Christ.

But again, you might ask, how do we know what to do as Christians? Well just today, you were given some powerful words in the readings of Scripture to lead and guide you:

Justice: if we care nothing about those who do not have the basic necessities of life, if we are only looking out for ourselves – then we miss the mark – we sin – in what we have done and in what we have failed to do.

Faithfulness: when we stray from who we are called to be, when we don’t keep Christ at the center of our lives, when we chase after the false values of the world – then we miss the mark – we sin.

Encouragement: when we are constantly critical of others, when we speak words that tear each other down rather than build each other up – then we miss the mark – we sin – we are not thinking or acting like Jesus.

Harmony and peace: when we argue, belittle, judge harshly, exclude rather than include – then we miss the mark – we sin.

Welcome: when we are not open to new people or new ideas, when we insist that this is the way things have always been and we are unwilling to change – then we miss the mark – we sin.

Mercy: when we are not as forgiving of others as Christ is forgiving to us, when we don't accept people where they are and gently encourage them to be something more – then we miss the mark – we sin.

And those are just some of the things from today's readings! Again, you come to church Sunday after Sunday to listen to God's word – to learn how to be more like Christ.

I think when you come right down to it – most of us know when we hit the mark – and when we don't. Knowledge of what is right or wrong usually isn't the problem – but consistently choosing to do the right thing usually is. As I said in one of my other letters – even within myself – the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. . .

There is a story coming from you Native American culture that goes something like this:

There is a great battle that rages inside every person.

One side is the soaring eagle. Everything the eagle stands for is good and true and beautiful.

The eagle soars high above the clouds. Even though it dips down into the valleys, the eagle builds its nest on the mountaintops.

The other side within each person is the slithering serpent, the rattlesnake. That crafty, deceitful snake represents the worst aspects of a person – the darker side. The snake feeds upon one's downfalls and setbacks, and justifies itself by its presence in the slithering mass.

Who wins this great battle in your life? None other than the one that is fed the most – the eagle, or the rattlesnake.

During these days of Advent – feed your eagle by allowing Christ to move in and take possession of your heart, your will, your soul.

Feed your eagle – by quieting your heart and your life – listen and wait – and fall in love with Jesus all over again.

Feed your eagle – by daring to believe that Christ is the reality beyond and beneath and around all things, visible and invisible, and that Christ provides for us and loves us and blesses us and saves us. Feed your eagle – by repenting: feel remorse for what you have done and for what you have failed to do --- for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!

Until next week, I am affectionately your brother in Christ, Paul.