Once my grandfather gave me a penny, copper, not very shiny. But it was like no other penny I had ever seen. For it was a flying eagle cent. Stamped upon it was the date, 1857. Though the coin collectors book indicated it to be worth a dollar or so, I prized this penny like none my friends had ever seen.

I had a bank in which I kept my not so prized coins. It looked like a can of Sohio Oil. To open it a lidx cover was pried off the bottom. One day in a hurry, I grabbed a penny in my drawer, used it to pry off the cover on my bank. Off popped the lid, but in my fingers was my flying eagle cent. Scratched, marred. Carelessly I had taken what was precious and used it as if it meant nothing to me.

Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, to stumble it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung round his neck and he were thrown into the sea.

Do you hear how precious you are to Jesus? I do every time I hear that warning. Jesus is saying to me that he will take a great millstone and wrap it around my neck, thrown me into the sea, if I cause you, his little ones to stumble. In my work as pastor he has entrusted to me, that which he prizes most, you. You are his treasure. He wants me never to forget that.

Nor does he want you to forget that. And so gives you this warning: If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hand to go to Gehenna, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut if off; it is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into Gehenna. And if you eye causes you to six stumble, pluck it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into Gehenna where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

You noticed that I read this passage using the word stumble, for that is what is in the Greek, and instead of the word hell, the word Gehenna, for that also is what the text says.
Gehenna, the valley outside the city wall of Jerusalem, where the refuse was thrown. Gehenna, the city dump, where the fires smoldered day and night and maggots crawled and consumed.

Whatever causes you to stumble, whatever threatens to make you fall, do not make peace with it, leave it in your path. Even if it should seem as much a part of you as your own hand, do not let it make you worth nothing, good for nothing, trash. You are not meant for the garbage heap, the eternal dump we call hell. You are a child of God, when he looks upon you his eye sparkles, his heart is full of joy. Don't take what is precious and use it carelessly. Your life.

Jesus does not want us to make peace with those things that cause us to stumble. Yet how much we are doing just that these days. We and activity to activity, responsibility to responsibility, until there is no time to speak to God in prayer, to read and meditate on the scriptures, no time to take a quiet walk with a child, to sit in silence with a spouse. The TV is on like a drug that keeps us from feeling the emptiness within.

There is a word from Jesus that I want each of us to take with us this morning. Not the threat of the millstone or Gehenna, the garbage heap, but this promise: For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ, will by no means lose his reward. Such a little thing, a cup of water. But you are so precious to the Almighty God, that he will take note of even the smallest kindness another does for you, his child in Christ.
If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off, your foot, cut it off, your eye, pluck it out. Better to give up even that which you think you could not do without than to be trash, thrown into hell.

I could hand out a piece of paper to you all right now. Write down the causes of your stumbling, whatever leads you to sin, away from God, toward emptiness, worthlessness. Most of us would have no difficulty identifying the problem.

Then remove it from your life. Put it aside, give it up. And many of us would find that it is easier to pluck out an eye than to give up worry and doubt and fear. Easier to cut off a hand than to face the emptiness and loneliness within. Easier to chop off a foot than to walk without the crutches that we use to get us through the day.

Stumbling. Stumbling and falling right into the emptiness ourselves that's where we're headed. God's precious coin is being scratched and marred. Faith begins with the confession of our need for help, our need for cleansing, our need for forgiveness.

Into our stumbling world, God has sent his Son. We cannot change ourselves, make ourselves shining and new. We cannot overcome the causes of stumbling, but Christ can. In his dying and rising he has perfected our cleansing, our renewing. He stamps us with his image, we are his coin, precious beyond price, through his cleansing without any even the slightest scratch.

Yes, into our stumbling world, God has sent his Son, that what is precious to him not belost, but saved for eternity.

country, the American Mission Sunday within the ELCA. In churches across our
This is the mission of the church, to see that all who are precious to
God are saved for eternity. This mission begins with me, with you. Do not
settle for stumbling, Jesus says. Do not let yourself be lost.

This mission goes beyond ourselves to our nearest neighbors. Mother,
father, son, daughter, husband, wife, they also are precious to God, his treasure
coins. Do not cause their stumbling, they are far more precious to God than
any and all things.

This mission extends to this family of faith, each minted, stamped in the
image of Christ. Each to be treated with gentleness, tenderness, care.

This mission reaches into our community, to all we see each day. No
matter how scratched and marred, no matter how broken and battered and used
by life, Christ wants them for his own. His will is that not one be thrown
into the trash to be delivered to hell. Not one.

This mission reaches to places we have not been, to people we have not
met. To Kenton, to our Savior's Lutheran church. Through our gifts we become
partners with them in ministry.

This mission reaches into all the world.

There is a word from Jesus that I want each of us to take with us this
morning. Not the threat of the millstone, not the threat of Gehenna, the
garbage heap. Rather a promise: For truly I say to you, whoever gives
you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ, will by no
means lose what reward. Such a little thing, a cup of water. But you are so precious to the
Almighty God, that he will remember for eternity, even the smallest kindness
another does for you, his child in Christ.