

Readings for September 26, 2021 – 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

'You Belong to Christ'

Jesus uses some drastic language to remind us to be like the "little ones" in our belief. Perhaps we can hang out with those who do God's work, and strive to avoid the things that pull us away from Christ. At the same time, we cannot forget to tell others of the joy we feel as Christians. "Would that we were all prophets!"

Opening Prayer: Be with us, oh Lord, as we gather today to study your Word and to grow closer to you. Guide our hearts and minds and help us to hear the message you have in mind for each of us.

Opening Question:

Take a minute to think of some reasons why you have chosen (or felt called) to participate in an SCC this fall. In the space below, write down two or three things you hope to gain through this experience.

You may also want to write down one thing you can do that will enhance this experience for you.

(If you feel comfortable, share your thoughts with the group).

Reading I Nm 11:25-29

The LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to Moses.
Taking some of the spirit that was on Moses, the LORD bestowed it on the seventy elders;
and as the spirit came to rest on them, they prophesied.
Now two men, one named Eldad and the other Medad,
were not in the gathering but had been left in the camp.
They too had been on the list, but had not gone out to the tent;
yet the spirit came to rest on them also, and they prophesied in the camp.
So, when a young man quickly told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp, "
Joshua, son of Nun, who from his youth had been Moses' aide, said,
"Moses, my lord, stop them." But Moses answered him, "Are you jealous for my sake?
Would that all the people of the LORD were prophets!
Would that the LORD might bestow his spirit on them all!"

Responsorial Psalm Ps 19:8, 10, 12-13, 14

R. (9a) The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.

The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul;
the decree of the LORD is trustworthy, giving wisdom to the simple.

R. The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.

The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true, all of them just.

R. The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.

Though your servant is careful of them, very diligent in keeping them, Yet who can detect failings?

Cleanse me from my unknown faults!

R. The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.

From wanton sin especially, restrain your servant;

let it not rule over me. Then shall I be blameless and innocent of serious sin.

R. The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.

Reading II Jas 5:1-6

Come now, you rich, weep and wail over your impending miseries.

Your wealth has rotted away, your clothes have become moth-eaten,
your gold and silver have corroded, and that corrosion will be a testimony against you;
it will devour your flesh like a fire.

You have stored up treasure for the last days. Behold, the wages you withheld from the workers
who harvested your fields are crying aloud; and the cries of the harvesters
have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on earth in luxury and pleasure;
you have fattened your hearts for the day of slaughter.

You have condemned; you have murdered the righteous one; he offers you no resistance.

Gospel Mk 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

At that time, John said to Jesus,

"Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name,
and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us." Jesus replied, "Do not prevent him.

There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name
who can at the same time speak ill of me. For whoever is not against us is for us.

Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ,
amen, I say to you, will surely not lose his reward.

"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin,
it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck
and he were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.

It is better for you to enter into life maimed than with two hands to go into Gehenna,
into the unquenchable fire.

And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life crippled
than with two feet to be thrown into Gehenna. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.

Better for you to enter into 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.'"

Related Reflections

The disciples have been warned that the desire to be great undercuts the work of the kingdom. But this warning has not been completely understood... They see someone casting out demons in Jesus' name and they immediately perceive it as a threat. Is someone poaching on their territory?

The fact that they "tried" to stop him may indicate that they failed. Then they are reporting this incident to Jesus to have him "stop" him. But Jesus has a different vision of what is happening. His ultimate priority is the kingdom. If people are contributing to the kingdom and doing it in his name, then they will not denigrate the divine will (Mark 3:34). The disciples are urged to have a more generous understanding of who is with them. All are for them, unless they prove otherwise... It is not the disciples' role to exclude... The work of the kingdom is wider than their group and so is the name of Jesus.

The kingdom is also wider than exorcists. It includes those who offer hospitality (give a cup of water to drink) and perform small tasks. However, those bent on greatness often fail to notice these people... For Jesus, the little ones will not lose their reward. Their hospitality creates the kingdom as much as proclamations, teaching, healing and exorcism... They do things because of Christ. They are believers, and as believers they belong to Christ.

Finally, the best way for the disciples to avoid causing scandal to others is to eliminate the cause of scandal in themselves. But this is not easy. The drives to be egocentric, to save one's own life, to be great, to lord it over others, and to harm others in order to save yourself are the way of the world. These ways of thinking have become "second nature." They are like a hand, a foot and an eye (see 1 Cor 12). Staying related to God means life; to eliminate that relationship means hell. The way to stay related to God is to eliminate what breaks that relationship.

- John Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels, Year B*, Liturgical Press

Jesus, over and over, startles us into a new kind of thinking about the Kingdom of God.

In Mark, Jesus seems to have something more in mind than urging his followers not to sin with hand, foot, or eye, no matter how colorfully he speaks. Mark's context (9:33-41) for this saying is Jesus' new teaching about greatness in the Kingdom of God. In particular, it's not something the disciples should be arguing about. They shouldn't imagine, either, that they can prevent non-members of their group from driving out demons. God's power can't be limited that way.

Then comes the section with the saying about hand, foot, and eye and how to enter into life. Curiously it starts not with a temptation that one might fall into, but with something more aggressive. "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believes to sin..." I'm wondering if the "little ones" might include people who happen to be missing a hand, foot, or eye.

Here are three factors that make me think more than personal morality is animating the saying in Mark:

- First, a major theme in Mark's Gospel is Jesus' opposition to the political, religious, and economic establishment represented by the Temple in Jerusalem. It was a far more entrenched vehicle of sin than anything a hand, foot, or eye could accomplish.
- Second, Jesus spent a lot of time with maimed, crippled, and blind people, along with people experiencing many other problems.
- Third, Temple rules forbade entrance by anyone who was not "whole." The lame, maimed, blind, etc. were not allowed in. (See Samuel 5:8).

I put these facts together with the real temptation the disciples struggle with, the temptation to exclude others and make comparisons among themselves. It makes me think Jesus is not dealing with three different sins his followers might fall into. The saying as a whole functions like a parable with one over-arching meaning – God: Stop trying to limit God's love.

The Temple and the religious establishment it represented did that, and this Temple is doomed, in Jesus' thinking (Mark 13:2). A disciple who similarly tries to limit God's love would be better off if a "great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea."

Matthew's Gospel has its own way of challenging the Temple's restrictive policy: Jesus throws the buyers and sellers out of the Temple and upsets the tables of the money changers. (MT 21:12-14) Just then the blind and the lame approach Jesus "in the Temple area" where they weren't supposed to be, and he cures them.

Jesus almost makes being blind or maimed, or otherwise suffering, a marker for preferred entry into his Father's Kingdom. He had done so all along by his behavior. Now he does so in words. In the sphere of personal morality, Jesus does not seriously want people to enter into life by injuring themselves. But on a political level his literal words are aimed directly at the Temple establishment's disenfranchisement of a large number of people, people whose company Jesus preferred.

- Jack Hartjes, www.patheos.com/blogs

Discussion Questions

What are some of the "millstones" around our necks that pull us away from God's loving embrace (which is always there for us)? Could this even include some friends or family members?

Do you find Jesus' words difficult, or even shocking?

What do you think this passage actually says about our worldly concepts of greatness? Does it help to know that even Jesus' closest friends had trouble with this desire to be the greatest?

Jesus explains some things that might happen "because you belong to Christ." With this in mind, what do you think it means to "belong to Christ?" What does it really entail?

Focus on Justice

If you agree with the reflection from Jack Hartjes (above) how do you think Jesus is calling us to live? Is it just about our own personal morality (don't steal –hand; don't lust or look at porn – eye; stop kicking the dog – foot)?

What about the community aspect of our sins?

Do you think the disciples experienced some fear and jealousy when they saw someone else doing what Jesus taught them to do – someone outside of their group? Why do you think this may have been so?

Talk a little about how our fears can cause us to lash out at other groups and people we don't understand? Do you think fear motivates some of the racial and social issues today?

What can help to calm our fears?

Prayer:

Good and gracious God, I am grateful for your lessons in discipleship. You have challenged me to open my heart and to follow a path of radical love. Help me to listen more readily to those I tend to exclude, to those I may even fail to see. Help me to learn, even within moments of discord, to trust in you.

I ask this in Jesus' name, who welcomed sinners and walked with the marginalized and excluded of the world. Amen.

—Bryan Sokol, child research psychologist and faculty member at St. Louis University