

Weekly Reflections on the Sunday Gospel

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TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Our Scripture passage comes from the Gospel of Mark 9:38–43, 45, and 47–48. In this reading Jesus continues to address His disciples' destructive and mistaken pursuits of worldly greatness while at the same time offering a challenging instruction on the necessity of sacrifice and the purpose of faith. These instructions have a great deal to offer us as disciples as well.

The disciples bring to Jesus what they falsely believe to be a problem: Other people, who were not among the inner group of followers, were healing in the name of Jesus. Jesus explains to them that this situation is a blessing and not a problem. The problem was not in the healing but in the disciple's possessiveness and defensiveness of their ministry. The disciples were exemplifying the unhealthy thirst for power and control that would stifle and thwart the good works of others if those works challenged their authority or encroached on their mission. Their objection raises the question as to why they themselves were not trying to heal the possessed man in the first place. Perhaps they were envious that someone else was doing what they should have been doing.

It is interesting, too, that the disciples objected to the actions of the healer because "he did not follow us." They seem to demonstrate little concern for the one who needed healing while they were overly concerned and possessive about their own status as leaders. Their objection makes us wonder what their ultimate priority was—that people follow Jesus or that people follow them. These attitudes can be destructive in the life of the Church today as much as they were destructive in the lives of the disciples nearly two thousand years ago. Sometimes people involved in parish ministries can be very possessive about their authority and field of responsibility which might lead them to be resentful and antagonistic towards others who offer to assist with those efforts.

Also, the feelings of jealousy and the pursuit of exclusive power and control can lead to envy when others succeed in their ministry efforts. Such feelings can even cause those involved in ministry to undermine and sabotage the noble efforts of others who desire to promote the Gospel. The battle for power and control can be fought with rules and regulations, budgeting, facility allocation, slander, malicious comments, and appeal to false loyalty. The spirit of possessiveness and defensiveness is recognizable any time we feel threatened by another's success or resentful when God's will is accomplished through another's ministry. As disciples, it is important to realize that such feelings reveal a need for conversion and repentance so that we can promote the work of the Holy Spirit wherever, whenever, and through whomever God wants. Such an attitude will lead us to care for those in need rather than seek a mistaken greatness based on the ability to control rather than the willingness to cooperate.

The disciples were upset that some people did not follow them, while Jesus reminds them that being a disciple means first and foremost following Him. How can we be tempted to want people to "follow us" today instead of rejoicing when they follow the Lord?

How can the desire for power and control give rise to envy and subversive actions in your home, marriage, and even within a faith community?

In what ways can self-concern lead those in authority to ignore the needs of the suffering (the “little ones”)?

What are the weapons people use to wage their battles for power and control?

How do you know when you are giving in to the same temptation for self-preservation or self-promotion?

power, and control that was manifested by the disciples, and what can you do to seek conversion and repentance for these destructive and divisive desires?

How can the power of evil use the human desires for power and control to thwart the work of God and lead disciples astray?

Jesus then gives the Church an important governing principle in its relationship with the larger world: Those who are not against us are for us. The fact that the healer was acting in the name of Jesus also warrants our attention and reflection. The Holy Spirit can work in a mysterious way to share the grace of Christ with all human beings. God is not limited by our expectations or understandings when it comes to His mercy and love. All people are invited to know, love, and serve the Lord. This invitation is commonly known as the Universal Call to Salvation. It does not mean that all people will respond to this call or that all paths are equal. Rather, it acknowledges that God’s grace can work in mysterious ways, even in the hearts of those who do not know Christ so that they respond to the voice of their conscience (Holy Spirit) and do what is good.

When Christians encounter goodness, charity, and other values of the Gospel in non-Christian environments, they should interpret these positive values as a cooperation with the Gospel. As such, these actions are good because they are done “in the name of Christ”. This is an important principle for the Christian understanding of salvation. Namely, that all grace comes from Jesus Christ and that even those who “do not follow us” can participate in that grace, although in an imperfect and unknown way. According to our Lord’s instruction, people of good will should be seen as co-workers in the mission of the Gospel, and their efforts should take place unhindered by Christians. This teaching does not in any way diminish the importance of evangelization which seeks to introduce all persons to Jesus who is the only source of the grace and life inspires their good actions. Rather, it acknowledges how those who do not know Christ can benefit from a real cooperation with the Holy Spirit and merit from their good efforts (see Mt 25:40). Ultimately, cooperation itself can become an effective means of evangelization in such circumstances.

Who is fulfilling the values of the Gospel today in a secular context or through a non-Christian religious environment?

How can a person’s good actions be an opportunity to introduce them to Jesus (evangelization)?

Who is healing, confronting evil, and alleviating the suffering of others?

The disciples of Jesus will be truly great when they can recognize and rejoice any time the mission of the Gospel is being carried out. How does this statement challenge you to become great?

How can people of a particular faith confession attempt to diminish and dismiss the good works that are being accomplished in other faith confessions?

The next area of greatness Jesus emphasizes is the faithful sacrifice needed to care for the little ones in our midst. To be a great disciple means both preventing the scandal that causes others to lose faith and being willing to make the necessary amendments of life to avoid occasions of sin. To demonstrate this point Jesus uses the dramatic example of removing one's hand, foot, and eye. There can be various levels on which this teaching can be interpreted. The image of a body can either refer to an individual person and the need to amend their personal causes of weakness, but the image can also refer to the corporate body of the Church and the need to remove or discipline members who are causing scandal and serious sin in the community (the image of a body was used as a communal and political metaphor in ancient times). This teaching on the necessity of sacrifice was commonly known in the time of Jesus. The Babylonian Talmud had similar metaphors involving amending one's hands, feet, and eyes so as to avoiding certain sexual sins.^[1]

However one wishes to apply the images, it should be remembered that Jesus is speaking metaphorically and not about physical mutilation. The ancient audience would have known that our Lord was speaking in metaphors. Nonetheless, the Lord is addressing the need for real and ready sacrifice on the part of disciples when it comes to avoiding those things that lead us astray and into sin. Disciples who want to be great must be people who can humbly acknowledge their need to amend their lives so as to avoid those temptations, which play on their natural weaknesses. Greatness, then, is not in doing what we want but in living as God wants. Such a life inspires others' faith and strengthens the little ones, while a life of self-will and sin scandalizes little ones.

How can people be tempted to retain un-Christian practices while claiming to be a disciple?

What sacrifices have you made as a consequence of your faith in Jesus?

What sin most scandalizes Christians today?

How can a faith community help its members have the courage and tools to identify occasions of sin, and amend their lives to avoid those occasions?

What other motivations might people have that cause them to sacrifice besides witness of Faith and discipleship?

The last thing Jesus addresses in this passage is the fundamental purpose of faith when He contrasts eternal life with Gehenna (an image for Hell). It is this stark alternative that motivates us to embrace sacrifice, especially the painful sacrifices necessary to avoid situations of sin on a personal, communal, and institutional level. It is also this contrast that motivates us to seek above all the mission of the Gospel rather than our own personal kingdoms. Finally, it is this contrast that ultimately reminds us why we follow Jesus and carry the cross of faithful discipleship. The purpose of the Christian life is to enter the Kingdom of God. If we settle for anything less than that goal for any reason, we have wasted the gift of faith and distorted the meaning of discipleship. There can be lots of reasons why people pursue religious experiences, membership in faith communities, and works of mercy, but if any of those reasons are anything less than eternal life with God, we have pursued a mistaken goal and lost the focus that is necessary to embrace difficult moments of sacrifice. Faith is not a sentimental ornament in a Christian's life; faith must be the primary driving principle that effectively leads us to God.

^[1] See *Babylonian Talmud: Translation and Commentary*, Trans. By J. Neusner, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2011.

Is following Jesus Christ the core of your being and the fundamental motivation for your decisions and actions each day?

What else can a person choose as the core of their being or the fundamental motivation for their decisions and actions each day?

Why is a religion of convenience unable to lead a person to the greatness Jesus describes in this passage?