

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

**Either/Or Moments** Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time/B September 27, 2015  
9:00 AM Nm 11:25-29; **Jas 5:1-6; Mk 9:38-43, 45, 47-48** (What in our own personal lives leads us away from God?)

**“If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.”**

Well, don't worry; we won't be doing that today. But we need to wonder **why Jesus would use such graphic language**, such violent language. Well, it's always important that we put Scripture in context. And the context of today's reading follows last week where Jesus was holding up a child saying, look, to enter the kingdom of God is really very simple; you just have to be like a child. But then he went on to describe how inappropriate were certain forms of behavior like rivalry, self-importance, and competition for attention and favor, although he allowed and encouraged competition in service, to be the servant of all. So this follows that sort of thinking. And he is talking about the **dire dangers that really do lie in life: giving scandal**, causing those who are innocent to trip and fall and lose their innocence. He says, “It is better to have a millstone tied around your neck and thrown into the sea.” That's dire; but he is trying to say, yes, but scandal is dire too.

So **he is talking about the different ways in which people can block their own growth and prevent themselves from entering into the graces of God**, the kingdom of God, the power of God. That is why he says these dire things, these graphic, violent remarks. “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better to enter into life maimed than with two hands to be cast into Gehenna, into the unquenchable fire.” Now by the way, Gehenna means a garbage dump outside Jerusalem. It was in perpetual flames because, well, they produced a lot of garbage and they were always burning it. So this is an image of wasting one's life. Is that possible? Yes, **we can waste our lives**. We could make our lives into refuse, sad to say.

But what about this cutting off your hand or plucking out your eye? Well, of course Jesus never intended anyone to do any cutting because a hand is never the cause of sin, nor is a foot, nor is an eye. **The organs of perception do not cause anything. Sin lies in the will, and it's willing what God does not will.** That's what sin is. It's making choices that are not in our own best interest, wherein **God wants us to choose what is in our own best interest.** And you will remember from last week, that **our best interests always merge with the best**

**interests of others.** We are created to be a family. We are created to be a communion. We are created for others. **God's goal is to bring us together into a community with him and the entire creation.** So we have to keep that in mind.

But **we can get attached to all kinds of things, attitudes, even beliefs, that block this movement toward unity.** So in life we do reach a fork in the road at times. Now you may have remembered or you may have heard recently the great late Yogi Berra once said, "When you get to the fork in the road, take it." Well, actually that makes sense in the case that the fork in the road he was referring to was the fork in the road to his house that was a circular drive. But on the road to God it is not a circular drive. It does matter which we take. **There is a way that goes God's way and there is way that goes against God.** There are either/or moments in life, and this is what Jesus is talking about in today's gospel. It's not pleasant to talk about it, but he wants to inform his followers **there are either/or moments. It's very important that in those moments you listen to God and follow God.**

So this leads us to a question: **What in our own personal lives leads us away from God?** Everyone would probably have a different answer, but we have to ask the question. In my experience, one of the great common problems of people is **the sin of indifference, not caring.** That is actually a capital sin. Unfortunately it's called "sloth," and people don't understand it. They think it means laziness. It doesn't. It means **indifference to what is really good.** And we can be very comfortable and stop caring about people who aren't comfortable. It is a very common flaw.

**Pope Francis** recently mentioned several problems of this type in modern society that obstruct the gospel. Oddly, he is not talking about atheism. He is not talking about lack of religion. He is not talking here about even materialism. **What he is talking about is the warping of religion and spirituality.** He said there are three of them, three forms of warping. One he talks about is **"spirituality of well-being divorced from any community life."** Again, we are created for each other. We are created to relate to one another and to care about one another. So if we have a spirituality of well-being all by ourselves, and that does exist and is actually rather common, that's not good. That's not leading us to God at all. Secondly, he talks about **"a theology of prosperity, detached from responsibility for our**

**brothers and sisters.”** Of course we all want to be prosperous. But, as the second reading emphasized, our prosperity makes it incumbent on us all the more to be responsible for our brothers and sisters less prosperous. Thirdly, he says **“a depersonalized experience which is nothing more than a form of self-centeredness,”** so-called New Age spirituality, all about me: how I can be more effective, how I can be happier, and so on. The general drift of all these comments is that **the source of so much mischief and falsehood in the world is not the lack of religion, but the warping of religion from within, from within religious institutions.** In other words, forms of religion and spirituality actually cause people to sin, and that’s what has to be plucked out. This requires the sober discernment and humble openness to the Holy Spirit. **The Holy Spirit is the only authentic guide in discerning what is really from God and what isn’t, because everything from God is from the Holy Spirit.**

Now these issues need reflection, but eventually they also need action of some kind. **We shouldn’t just reflect; we should take action.** But what kind of action? Well, now we get into all kinds of differences of opinion, and that’s legitimate. **You are free to differ with one another about what kind of action should be taken,** whether it’s even appropriate to bring your religious values, your spiritual values, into the marketplace. Those are things you have to think about and take responsibility for. **We need to respect those who see things differently** from ourselves, and of course vice versa: **they have to respect us,** otherwise we are not aiming at that unity. We are letting something stop us, and we are justifying it.

Now as an example, just an example, our Peace and Social Justice Ministry points out that domestic healthcare workers are excluded from certain protections extended to other workers, concerning such matters as minimum wage, overtime, and so on. So they invite you to send a postcard to the governor asking to remedy this exclusion. This may not change the world, but it is an example of something we could do if we study the issue and decide it’s the right thing. After all, **our response can make a difference,** maybe not every time, but **if we keep responding and we keep saying what we believe, that will eventually make a difference.** Postcards are available at the door.