

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Sep 27th 2015

Would that all the people of the LORD were prophets!

Would that the LORD might bestow his spirit on them all! Numbers 11

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. Mark 9

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. Mark 9

I love what Moses says to the young man who was scandalized that the two stray men received the Holy Spirit, but not in the "planned" way. I love that Jesus has the same response when his disciples are upset that someone else - who isn't a "regular" follower - was driving out demons in Jesus' name. That's the first grace of these readings for me, for us all.

God's grace and God's gifts don't always come in the pathways we always expect. It is an unfortunately natural jealous reaction in us that resents that someone isn't a follower of Jesus "the right way." And, we miss the grace, the presence of the Lord working in that person, through that person, because isn't happening the "approved way."

We can too often easily condemn others - whether they are bad sinners or just people who don't seem to be "following the rules." Jesus sees the presence of the Spirit, where we might not. So, we can be encouraged to look more deeply for the effects of the Spirit's working, rather than the externals. Each of us can discover ways we do this.

Secondly, James makes it quite concrete. Several weeks ago, he challenged us to notice whether we treat a wealthy visitor better than a poor one. The next week, he reminded us of the importance of "good works" in the form of care for others, as a manifestation of our faith. Then, last week, he warned us about the results of "jealousy and selfish ambitions" as well as the divisive "passions" within us. This week, he reminds us that wealth is "corrosive," and it will "devour your flesh like a fire." And, he powerfully points us that our injustices towards others "are crying aloud."

Thirdly, Jesus offers us a remedy from the things that take us in such divisive, dangerous, destructive and sinful directions. He tells us to "cut it off" - to separate ourselves from what is the source of our self-defeat.

Finally, the easiest way to begin that journey is for us to recognize the problem. Why am I so judgmental? Why do I seek to have more, to look like I'm better than others? Why does justice or care for those on the margins come with difficulty? What causes me to sin? What underlying unfreedom is in me? From there, we can ask for forgiveness and healing. And, asking for healing can lead us to identify what instincts, practices and habits I can change. Change is difficult. We only change something which has become habitual when we arrive at a deeper desire for something else. Otherwise, it is so easy to deny we have a problem - even when we know we aren't happy. When we experience God's love and mercy filling our heart with gratitude, then we can want to be closer to the one who loves us. Being closer to Jesus leads us to want to be more like Jesus. Gradually, his love heals the wounds and the brokenness and helps make our heart like his.

Dear Lord, fill my heart with your love. And, then, open my heart to love the way you love. Open my heart to those who are different from me, difficult for me, to those who have hurt me. Let me see, or at least believe, that your own Spirit is with them, in them, somehow. Let me believe that there is a path to you from every human heart - even the most sinful, those who are most insecure and difficult. Transform me from a person who collects things for my security or status and help me become an instrument of your justice, a real advocate for those in need. I ask this, trusting in your Spirit's work within me. Amen.

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