

## 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

The disciples must have received regular guidance from Jesus about doing right and avoiding wrong. Today's gospel shows how they went to Jesus and told him what was going on to obtain deeper understanding.

Jesus' sayings in this passage range across three different scenarios: people not among the disciples still accomplishing good, people causing the innocent to sin, and the disciples causing harm to themselves.

In the first case, John tells Jesus they saw someone not among the followers driving out demons in Jesus' name. John says they tried to stop him. Jesus replied, "Don't." People outside the group can still accomplish good in Jesus' name. They may even give a cup of water to a disciple and obtain a reward. We Catholics sometimes think we are the only Christians who have faith figured out, but others who call upon the same Jesus, read the same gospels, and hold the same moral values also accomplish powerful deeds in his name. Even apart from religion, in areas from politics to sports, we often so want people outside our group to follow along with the group that we fail to notice the good they accomplish in spite of our preferred plan. Jesus said, "whoever is not against us is for us."

In the second case Jesus refers to those who cause the innocent to sin. They are more present than we may realize. They stalk the internet, they hide in neighboring houses, they appear on the streets more normal than they are. The future of such bad leaders is worse than a forced drowning in the sea. Those who deal in sex trafficking, who force children to join in theft or deception, who lure the weak into drugs and gangs—their future is bad. We all owe children watchful care. May God preserve each of us from taking others with us into sin.

That can happen especially when the third case has arisen: disciples doing harm to ourselves. Jesus uses extreme language about the hand, the foot and the eye. These frequently lead us into temptations: Our hands prowl where they do not belong. Our feet take us to places of false delights. Our eyes seek out views that objectify others, that entrap those who despair of a better life, and that never fully satisfy. Jesus' bold declaration—cut off your limb, pluck out your eye—shows how troublesome our own bodies can be if we do not govern them with our will. We can avoid the third case by practicing discipline every day over hand, foot and eye.

Today's gospel seems almost cluttered with advice. Jesus may have offered these sayings on different days when specific occasions arose. Mark may have collected these and lined them up in this chapter of his gospel for our meditation. But this is often how life comes at us—cluttered with temptations to exclude people we have judged too harshly, to force innocent allies to join us in sin, and to harm ourselves by our own actions. All those mighty temptations may confront us within the same amount of minutes it takes to read this little gospel. When they do, we do best to imitate John in this passage's first line. He went to Jesus and told him what was going on. John explained what he did in a difficult situation, and he listened for an answer. Whenever we are tempted or confused by what we did, our first resort is prayer.

*Saturday, September 25, 2021*