

26th Sunday of the Year (B)

September 30, 2018

Numbers 11:25-29
Psalm 19
James 5:1-6
Mark 9:38-43, 45,47-48

This gospel lesson is difficult to read, that is the discarding of an eye, hand, or foot. It is way too gruesome to contemplate. Before I quickly move on to something else, let me say this is a figure of speech that is meant to catch our attention. The Lord Jesus wants us to be careful, that we are not so rigid that we are a stumbling block, an occasion of sin for others.

To help us focus on what I find to be the important message within the word today, I share with you an illustration. It happened that an expedition of scientists traveled to Africa to capture and then study a particular species of monkey. It was important for the study that the monkeys be brought back to the United States alive and unharmed.

After working with the monkeys for a number of years, the scientists had a pretty good understanding of their behavior. And so, they devised a very effective way to trap them. They took a small jar with a long, narrow neck—just wide enough for a monkey to slip its paw through. Into the jar was placed a handful of nuts and several jars were staked out in the area.

Sure enough, scenting the nuts in the jar, a monkey would thrust its paw into the long neck of the jar and grab a fistful of nuts. But when it tried to withdraw the prize, the monkey could not get its clenched fist through the opening. Trapped in the anchored jar, the monkey was soon captured—all because he did not know enough to let go.

What a silly, foolish monkey, we might say. He could so easily have scurried up a tree and been free, if only he had opened his clenched paw. Yet, we are often in the same dilemma. Some things we grasp strongly and we are not even aware of it, others we may be aware of yet it is still no easier to let go.

The sacred word today is challenging us to look beyond our comfort zone, to be aware that rigid thinking might stand in the way at arriving at the truth. From time to time we are each defending our turf, rather than listen to a perspective that differs from our own. In the lesson from Numbers, there is Eldad, Medad, and Joshua, and in the lesson from Mark, there is John and some one driving out demons in Jesus' name. The request is to stop them, Eldad and Medad did not come into the tent and they have not right to prophecy. The man driving out demons and speaking in Jesus' name has no right to do so, he is not of our company. It is very important to notice that neither Moses nor Jesus stopped the good work that was taking place but wished for many more to do the same.

We are a part of something greater than our selves, the spirit of prophecy, the healing presence of Christ Jesus. Should we ever begin to think we have that gift of prophecy

while others do not, we are actually limiting our own selves to the gift of the Spirit. St. Ambrose, many years ago, once said, "Any truth, no matter who speaks it, comes from the Holy Spirit."

The sacred word today is challenging us to be careful. The error of rigid thinking is a temptation for each of us, as well as for each and every institution. We saw quite a bit of this playing out in the news this week, in the confirmation hearing for Judge Kavanaugh to serve on the Supreme Court. If the truth is the ultimate objective, then the senators must work together, listen to one another, take time and patiently work toward that truth. It was a sad display of theatrics but something positive seems to be unfolding.

The church is another example where rigid thinking and narrow perspectives have brought us to a place of embarrassment and failure to take care of the vulnerable. This has been in the news over the years and we have weathered through it but abuse has not been fully addressed. Weeks ago I felt compelled to make some kind of statement and I knew that many of you felt the same. Our listening sessions were a way to work together, knowing that together we would arrive at a statement, closer to the truth. We know that all the baptized receive the Holy Spirit. We believe that the baptized share in Jesus' ministry as priest, prophet, and king. Each member of the church has something to contribute, if only we would listen patiently to one another and be willing to break out of our rigid ways as a hierarchical church. The letter that we have written to the bishops in leadership urges the church to engage and collaborate with one another, especially the laity, men and women. When we recognize the giftedness of all the baptized we will come closer to the truth revealed in Christ.

We want our lives to be anchored in the church, in Christ, in the gospel word. We want our lives to be anchored in a community that supports us and is there for us in good times and in difficult times. We want a firm foundation but we do not want to be so rigid that we are limiting the work of the Spirit.

Nourished by word and sacrament, we go into this new week, open to the Holy Spirit mysteriously at work in all our lives.