

FIRST READING: Numbers 11:25-29

A reading from the Book of Numbers:

The LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to Moses. Taking some of the spirit that was on Moses, the Lord bestowed it on the seventy elders; and as the spirit came to rest on them, they prophesied. Now two men, one named Eldad and the other Medad, were not in the gathering but had been left in the camp. They too had been on the list, but had not gone out to the tent; yet the spirit came to rest on them also, and they prophesied in the camp. So, when a young man quickly told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp," Joshua, son of Nun, who from his youth had been Moses' aide, said, "Moses, my lord, stop them." But Moses answered him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the people of the LORD were prophets! Would that the LORD might bestow his spirit on them all!"

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 19:8, 10, 12-13, 14

The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.

The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul; the decree of the LORD is trustworthy, giving wisdom to the simple.

The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.

The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true, all of them just.

The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.

Though your servant is careful of them, very diligent in keeping them, Yet who can detect failings? Cleanse me from my unknown faults!

The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.

From wanton sin especially, restrain your servant; let it not rule over me. Then shall I be blameless and innocent of serious sin.

The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.

SECOND READING: James 5:1-6

A reading from the Letter of Saint James:

Come now, you rich, weep and wail over your impending miseries. Your wealth has rotted away, your clothes have become moth-eaten, your gold and silver have corroded, and that corrosion will be a testimony against you; it will devour your flesh like a fire. You have stored up treasure for the last days. Behold, the wages you withheld from the workers who harvested your fields are crying aloud; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on earth in luxury and pleasure; you have fattened your hearts for the day of slaughter. You have condemned; you have murdered the righteous one; he offers you no resistance.

The word of the Lord.

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark:

At that time, John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us." Jesus replied, "Do not prevent him. 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. Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ, amen, I say to you, will surely not lose his reward. "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. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed than with two hands to go into Gehenna, into the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life crippled than with two feet to be thrown into Gehenna. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. Better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into Gehenna, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'"

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 26th Sunday of the Year

As humans, we are very good at being able to tell who's us and who's not us. Sometimes we can tell by certain ethnic, political, religious, linguistic or gender markers. Tribalism is a strategy for human survival. It's important for us to know allies from enemies. We know, all too well, the differences between us and them. As people, we can act to extremes. Genocide has run in the family since the first people walked this earth. From Cain and Abel, both brothers, to our very day, such behavior causes much human suffering and misery. The news is full of it. Sadly, so is the world. What is the response in faith? Can God's faithful make any difference? If we can, how?

Moses accepted those who were not "us." Moses saw that the more who prophesied in God's name the better. God's Kingdom from those early days was to include all people in it. Two more displayed a movement toward Moses vision. However, God's chosen people were made up of twelve tribes. Such unity in call and purpose has never come close to Moses' prophetic vision. Sectarianism is endemic to Judaism, Islam and, sadly, Christianity. All God's children remain separated. Wait a minute. Who are God's children?

Each group thinks of themselves as God's children. Didn't God make us all? God has made only one human race. All people who have ever lived, all people who live now and all people yet to be born are God's beloved children. To achieve unity with others, they must become like us. This is not the Oneness of God. God is one by nature. We need to become, by God's grace, more like God. With God's grace we can see God in others and in them glimpse God's Oneness with us all and new possibilities.

My family has deep roots in this country. Some of my father's people arrived in the American colonies in the 1750s. They fought in the Revolutionary and Civil wars. They were also staunch Protestants. My grandfather was disinherited when, before he married my staunchly Catholic grandmother, he converted to Catholicism. Some of my mother's people arrived, after the Revolution, in the United States. They arrived in Boston and were given a more English sounding family name. They were German and Catholic. They mysteriously returned to

Germany in the 1790s, coinciding with the Alien and Sedition Acts. I say this for upon their eventual return to America they settled in Chicago with their original German family name. History repeats itself, not much has changed over the centuries.

Inclusion or exclusion are still options for many people. The choice is not in their hands. It's made by those in charge, with power, authority and wealth. What did Jesus do? He pointed out the common ground among his followers. Those John noticed working wonders did so in the name of Jesus. These others were acting as followers of Jesus. They belonged to Christ even though they were not part of Jesus' own group. Jesus actively worked to discover common ground and inclusion for them. How do we act? As we always have or deeply rooted in our faith in Christ? This is our challenge.

Who are the little ones? What is the scandal that leads them astray? Are they our children? Are they Jesus' followers, God's children? Are they the people in the world who do not yet know Jesus or believe in him? Perhaps they are all of us. Each person is created in God's image and likeness, a beloved child of God. There is only one human race. What leads to sin by hands, eyes and feet? Is it the body part that sins or the whole person? What is the sin?

Mark has linked a few things together in this passage. Others, apart from the twelve, preach, teach and heal in Jesus' name. People who show any believer kindness and care act in Jesus' name. People's sin can lead others to sin. To avoid sin is the believer's great task. How are these connected? The common phrase in the gospel is "in Christ." No one comes to faith without the grace of God. No one can avoid sin and do good apart from God's grace to do so. God's grace can work through those we encounter throughout our day, whether they or we know it or not. Mark has linked these stories to show the mystery of God as it unfolds in people's lives. God's love forgives any sin. We are mindful of living in Christ.

I don't know many people who are rich. I know more people who are affluent. I know many more who are comfortable. I know many who have a difficult time paying bills. When ever I have bought a new car, I've spent years paying it off, being 18 to 20 grand in debt. I can sit back and state with assurance that I am not rich or affluent. Today, financially, I am comfortable. Did James speak to me? As a priest, serving a parish of people, am I immune from James' challenging words? The words of scripture are never meant for someone else. They are meant for all who read them including me.

Jesus told his disciples that the poor are always with us. There is no way to eliminate poverty. Yet we continue to try. Going back to the gospel; do we try to act in Jesus' name as we interact with each other? Have we ever given a simple cup of cold water to someone who's thirsty? There are simple and ordinary acts that can lead people to salvation. Witnessing Christ in ours and others actions reveals Jesus. Who is the murdered Just One? It is Jesus, our God and Messiah. He died and rose to save us. We can never save ourselves. Jesus saving act, once and for all, is the source of all our good works. We never act apart from God's grace. Even when we sin, God's grace leads to forgiveness.

James' message is still a challenge. What is the center of our lives? Is it our comfort? Is it our wealth and power? Have we lost sight of the value of other's lives? Are our lives and the lives of those we love the only lives that matter? Can we feel compassion for the victims of wars, storms, earthquakes and famine? What impact do the images of refugees at our borders provoke in us? Can we see the face of Jesus in their faces? Jesus is there, with them. James speaks to us.

When I was a kid and in grammar school, I was exposed to the notion of “school spirit.” Each winter, one of our local public parks flooded a field for ice skating. We had no real sports program. We did have a skating match with our neighboring parish’s school. They and we would gather in the park for a race. We were about six blocks from the park. Our rival school was across the street from it. In all eight years of grade school, they always won the race. We have all been raised with such a sense of rivalry. Division between neighboring parishes and schools was once a value. It was us versus them. May the best prevail.

These days the diocese intends to consolidate parish communities and close church facilities. We all know the reasons for this. We may also be able to see the necessity too. Last weekend we have heard the options that we will face. Consolidation involves the merging of communities to forge a new and wider community. As separate parishes we are already members of the same Christian and Catholic Church. Jesus intended his Church to be one as he, the Father and Holy Spirit are one. The difference in our lives is that we, not God, can see the division. Through faith we can see through Jesus eyes.

Each parish community comes together with its gifts. Combining communities means change. The two men in Numbers added their gifts to the other seventy and in turn to the whole people of God. Those, in Christ, not of the twelve added to the mission and ministry of Jesus. Together they began the Church’s work toward the Kingdom of God. We have benefitted by the faith that has come to us through the apostles. How can our gifts, combined in a new community, blend, challenge and grow into the Kingdom still to come? From this perspective we never lose; for we gain the presence of Jesus in one another.

None of us, by ourselves, will ever effect much real change in human behavior. Sometimes we have a difficult time changing ourselves. When we fail, to whom do we go? We turn to God to forgive our sin and heal our failure. With God’s grace we can begin again. With God’s grace, we can focus on our relationships with those around us. We do not live in a vacuum. Even as we live, masked and continuing to keep adequate social distance, we show our commitment to each other as we keep ourselves and one another safe. Change begins with our respect for each human person. Change continues with how we perceive, face and interpret events and people, with eyes of faith. We can see others as Jesus sees us; as his beloved brothers and sisters

If anyone has listened to me enough times, I do repeat a number of common themes. God is infinite, eternal and unconditional. God is love. God so loved the world that he sent his son to be our savior; so that all who believe may have eternal life. There’s a reason. These notions are at the heart of both the gospel and the Church. We, on the other hand, have limits. We sin. When we reach our limits we can rely on God, who has no limits. God will give us what we need to surpass them. When we sin, God will forgive us. We can rely on God’s limitless mercy and compassion. When we face the limits of others, we can still encounter God. Others can experience God as we do, in love.

May we know God in all experiences and relationships.

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