

Synopsis: OT XXVI [B] (Sept 27) Mk 9:38-43, 45, 47-48 (L/15)

Introduction: Today's Scripture readings give us a strong warning against jealousy, intolerance and scandal.

Scripture lessons:In the first reading, we find jealousy, in its destructive form of envy, raising its ugly head in Moses' assistant and successor, Joshua. Moses and seventy future helpers were called by the Lord God to the Tent of Meeting for the Spirit-giving Ordination ceremony. But two of the invitees were absent. Hence, Joshua could not tolerate these absent men prophesying in the camp without receiving God's Spirit in the Tent of Meeting. Moses had to instruct Joshua to be tolerant. This selection is intended to provide a Biblical background for Jesus' response to the same kind of jealousy noticed in his apostles. In the second reading, James warns the rich against giving scandal by their denial of social justice to their workers in refusing to give them a living wage, by ignoring the needs of others and by condemning and murdering the innocent and the righteous. Withholding a day-laborer's wage was a terrible act of injustice, tantamount to murder in the agricultural economy of the ancient Middle East. Baptism commits every Christian to work for social justice, through peaceable (rather than violent), means. In the Gospel, we find intolerance among the apostles of Christ. John complained to Jesus that a man outside their group of selected disciples was exorcising demons in Jesus' Name, in spite of their attempt to prevent him from doing so. Jesus taught the Apostles lessons in his kind of tolerance and in the reward to be given to outsiders for good deeds they had done for the disciples of Jesus. We also hear the strong warning of Jesus against giving scandal, especially to innocent children, vulnerable members of the community and beginners in the Faith. Jesus warned the Apostles, and us, that, just as a doctor might remove by surgery a limb or some part of the body in order to preserve the life of the whole body, so we must be ready to part with anything that causes us or others to sin and which leads to spiritual death.

Life messages: 1) **Let us avoid conduct that can lead to scandal.** We give scandal and become stumbling blocks to others: a) when we are unkind or unjust in our treatment of them, b) when we humiliate them by hurting their pride and damaging their self-image, c) when we discourage, ignore, or refuse to accept them, and d) when we become judgmental of those who are still struggling to reach a level of commitment that we feel is too low to be useful. 2: **Let us learn the Christian virtue of tolerance:** Christian tolerance asks that we bear with the weaknesses of others (without condoning the evil they do), by: a) remaining true to our conscience and beliefs, b) respecting the differences we encounter, c) working together on projects of common interest, d) affirming what is good in the other person's position, even when we disagree on certain things, and e) allowing the light of Christ to shine through our loving words and deeds. OT XXVI [B]: Nm 11:25-29; Jas 5:1-6; Mk 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

Anecdote: #1: "Could you not have tolerated him for just one meal?" There is legend told about Abraham, the grand patriarch of the Jews, in the Mideast. According to the legend, Abraham always held off eating his breakfast each morning until a hungry person came along to share it with him. One day an old man came along, and, of course, Abraham invited him to share his breakfast with him. However, when Abraham heard the old man say a pagan blessing over his

food, he jumped up and ordered the old man out from his table, and from his house. Almost immediately, God spoke to Abraham. “Abraham! Abraham! I have been supplying that unbeliever with food every day for the past eighty years. Could you not have tolerated him for just one meal?” We are all children of God, and, hence, we have to love and tolerate everyone, as explained in today’s first reading and the gospel. (From *Jack McArdle*).

#2: Gandhi, Mandela, Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King Jr. With our fallen human nature, we fall victim to the evil tendency of trying to control the Spirit of God by our intolerance. Our own arrogance insists that another is not qualified to speak on justice or morality because of his/her lower educational qualifications, low-grade lifestyle, humble social background or race. As a society, we also tend to question people’s legitimacy – especially when they challenge us. Mohandas Gandhi, a Hindu leader in India, challenged the colonial rule of the British Empire over India with his principles of peace and non-violence. But the intolerant British Empire, initially dismissing him as a “silly, half-naked fakir,” tried to silence him by imprisonment. But later they found, to their horror that the entire nation was behind him in its fight for freedom from colonial rule. Nelson Mandela was ignored by the minority ruling class and was jailed for many for years as a radical because of his option for the poor and the oppressed in South Africa. Dorothy Day was imprisoned in the U. S. for her beliefs and was accused of being a Communist. Martin Luther King Jr. challenged a nation and its policy of discrimination. He was continually under surveillance by the FBI and was accused of inciting sedition and of being unpatriotic. There are Christians who still look on believers belonging to non-Christian religions and on members of Christian denominations different from their own as heretics and semi-pagans. In today’s Gospel, Jesus gives his disciples a lesson in Christian tolerance along with a warning against jealousy and scandal.

Introduction: Today’s readings give us a strong warning against jealousy, intolerance and scandal. In the first reading, we find jealousy, in its destructive form of envy, raising its ugly head in Moses’ assistant and successor, Joshua. Moses and 70 future helpers were called by the Lord God to the *Tent of Meeting* for the Spirit-giving ordination ceremony. But two of the invitees were absent. Hence Joshua could not tolerate these absent men prophesying in the camp without receiving God’s Spirit in the *Tent of Meeting*. Moses had to instruct Joshua to be tolerant. This selection is intended to provide a Biblical background for Jesus’ response to the same kind of jealousy noticed in his apostles. In the second reading, James warns the rich against giving scandal by their denial of social justice to their workers in refusing to give them a living wage, by ignoring the needs of others and by condemning and murdering the innocent and the righteous. Baptism commits every Christian to work for social justice through peaceable (rather than violent), means. In the Gospel, we find intolerance among the apostles of Christ. John complained to Jesus that a man outside their group of selected disciples was exorcising demons in Jesus’ Name, in spite of their attempt to prevent him from doing so. Jesus taught the Apostles lessons in his kind of tolerance and in the reward to be given to outsiders for good deeds they had done for the disciples of Jesus. We also hear the strong warning of Jesus against giving scandal, especially to innocent children, vulnerable members of the community and beginners in the Faith. Jesus warned the Apostles, and us, that, just as a doctor might remove a limb or some part of the body in order to preserve the life of the whole body, so we must be ready to part with anything that causes us or others to sin and which leads to spiritual death. Jesus is inviting us to integrate our bodies into our following of Christ, so that our hands become instruments of

compassion, healing and comfort, our feet help us to bring the Gospel to the world and our eyes learn to see the truth, goodness and beauty all around us.

First reading, Numbers 11:25-29: The Book of Numbers was written down after the Exile, in the 6th century BC, by Jewish priests who were hoping to put the broken nation back together and to keep it faithful to God. Chapter 11 has two stories of God's responses to the continuing complaints of the wandering Israelites. First, they had lamented the absence of meat from their diet, comparing the manna unfavorably to the variety of foods they had eaten while enslaved in Egypt. Moses appealed to God, saying that he was unable to manage the people alone. God heard his plea and told him to select seventy elders --- experienced men from among the tribes --- whom God would appoint as leaders of the people under Moses, and assemble them in the *Tent of Meeting*. Moses did so, and there God bestowed on them part of the Spirit He had given Moses. At once, they began to prophesy---a sign to the people that God had appointed them as His representatives. They prefigured the ministry of the apostles. But Joshua, a close follower and aide of Moses who was jealous for Moses' reputation, complained about two men named Eldad and Medad. Though both had been on Moses' list of 70, neither had attended the Spirit-giving ordination ceremony in the *Tent of Meeting*, yet both were prophesying. Moses asked Joshua, "*Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets!*" and reminded him gently that God is free to choose anyone He pleases as His prophet. Through Baptism, all of us are made God's ministers and God's prophets. We are filled with God's Spirit and empowered to interpret God's vision and message to the people around us, and we are not to grow jealous of those serving the community in positions of greater authority or working for the community in different venues.

Second Reading, James 5:1-6: The passage from James illustrates how the rich give scandal by their unjust treatment of laborers and their gross violation of the principles of social justice. Today's passage is a straightforward moral condemnation and a strong denunciation of the unscrupulous rich who enrich themselves by treating others unfairly and spend their riches in self-indulgence. Withholding a day-laborer's wage was a terrible act of injustice, tantamount to murder in the agricultural economy of the ancient Middle East. James is merciless in his condemnation of ill-gotten wealth. There's hardly a more emphatic passage in the New Testament. Baptism commits every Christian to work for social justice through peaceable (rather than violent), means. Pope Paul VI's encyclical on social justice echoes the tradition of James.

Exegesis: Today's Gospel gives us lessons in Christian tolerance and exemplary Christian living.

1) **Warnings against jealousy and intolerance:** The apostles wanted to reserve God's love and healing power to themselves as the "sole owners" and "authorized distributors"! We hear John complaining to Jesus that a stranger was driving out demons in Jesus' Name, though he was not of their company. They wanted Jesus to condemn the man. As occasionally unsuccessful exorcists, they may have been jealous of this stranger. Jesus, however, reprimanded his disciples for their jealousy and suspicion and invited them to broaden their vision and to recognize God's power wherever it was found. Like Moses in the first reading, Jesus challenged a rigid understanding of ministerial legitimacy. He wanted the apostles to rejoice in the good that others did, for God was the Doer of all good. Jesus enunciates a principle for his disciples: "*Anyone who is not against us is for us.*" God can and does use anyone to do His work. The Church has no

monopoly on God's work, truth, love or power to heal and reconcile. The work of the Kingdom is not confined to the baptized, although it is certainly our special work. This lesson is especially valuable today. Intolerance rising from fear and envy has a long history in the Christian Church and Christians are still known for a spirit of intolerance. Ask the average person on the street what he/she thinks is a Christian attitude, and he/she will use words like "judgmental," "narrow-minded," "dogmatic," "condemning," and "intolerant." The road to the brotherly love Jesus commands must begin with each of us. The cause of Christ is not served by one's rejecting other ways to God than one's own, or by one's claiming that no real good can take place outside the boundaries of one's own denomination. It is through mutual respect that we find common ground with others and discover strengths in different beliefs. Wherever we see God's work being done, we should give it our support and be ready to work together with those doing the work, whether they are Christians or not, believers or not.

2) A millstone for the scandal-giver: Jesus' second warning is against scandal-givers: those who cause the "little ones" to sin. The Greek word for "little ones" is *micron*, meaning the smallest or the least. It can mean children, those who are new to the Faith, or those who are weak in Faith. Jesus is pointing out that the scandalous behavior of older believers can be an obstacle to those whose Faith is just beginning to develop. Etymologically, the word scandal comes from the Greek *skandalon*, which was a trap-stick or bent sapling used for a snare. With a *skandalon* a hunter could catch a rabbit or other small prey. We may remember how the Enron scandal, the Monica Lewinsky affair, and of course, the horrible sexual abuse of children by the clergy were pictured by the media. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines scandal as "an attitude or behavior which leads another to do evil" (#2284).

3) Modern scandal-givers: The truly dangerous people to whom Jesus is referring are those evil ones who wear the mantle of religious leadership, and at the same time, by their counter-witness, turn the weak and the innocent away from God, and cause them to sin. Today, we know the irreparable harm done to the Church and the faithful by the scandals of clerical sex abuse. Likewise, scandal is often given by unorthodox theologians and false preachers, who propagate their anti-Christian ideas under the guise of Biblical and psychological research. Professors, even at some Christian universities, sometime advocate moral relativism and nihilism, converting students to their false beliefs. Even teachers at Catholic universities sometimes criticize papal pronouncements as "an infringement on academic freedom." Do they not give scandal? Our major social institutions — the news media, the Internet, law, public education, and the entertainment industry -- under the guise of "freedom of speech and expression," often seem hostile towards religion, erecting stumbling blocks to believers. We have an obligation to make known, with Christian courage, our views on these matters so as to protect the innocent.

3) Interpreting Jesus' words about self-mutilation? Our hands become instruments of sin according to what we touch and how we touch, in lust or greed or violence. Our feet are used for sin according to the places we have them take us. Our eyes become doorways for sins according to what we choose to look at or refuse to look at. However, it is important to understand that, in these passages about "plucking out an eye or cutting off a hand," Jesus is not speaking literally. We have more sins than we have bodily parts. Besides, even if all offending parts were removed, our hearts and minds -- the source of all sins-- would still be intact. Hence, these sayings are actually about our attitudes, dispositions, and inclinations. Jesus is inviting us to integrate

our bodies into our following of Christ, so that our hands become instruments of compassion, healing and comfort, our feet help us to bring the Gospel to the world, and our eyes learn to see the truth, goodness and beauty all around us.

By these startling words about self-mutilation, Jesus also means that we must cut out of our lives all practices that keep us away from God, and retain only those habits that draw us closer to God. Jesus is setting before all his disciples the one supreme goal in life that is worth any sacrifice. That goal is God himself and His will for our lives, which alone leads us to everlasting peace and happiness. Just as a doctor might remove a limb or some part of the body in order to preserve the life of the whole body, so we must be ready to part with anything which causes us to sin and which leads us or others to spiritual death. Billy Graham has a fantastic way of summing up this Gospel message by concluding his Crusades with a final challenge: "Decide! Cut away anything that prevents you from a radical decision for Jesus Christ! Decide for Christ!"

Life messages: 1) We need to avoid conduct that can lead to scandal. We give scandal and become stumbling blocks to others: a) when we are unkind or unjust in our treatment of them, b) when we reject them because of their weakness, faults or sins, c) when we humiliate them by hurting their pride and damaging their self-image, d) when we discourage, ignore, or refuse to accept them, e) when we ridicule them or deflate their dreams, f) when we follow a double standard: "*Do as I say; don't do as I do,*" g) when we set standards which are so high that we are unable to meet them ourselves, and h) when we become judgmental of those who are still struggling to reach a level of commitment that we feel is too low to be useful. On the other hand, we become good role models: a) when we support and guide others in moments of doubt, weakness, and suffering, b) when we increase other people's self-confidence by accepting them as they are and enabling them to discover their hidden talents, c) when we help them to grow by inspiring and correcting them, d) when we forgive them and listen to them with patience, and e) when we make ourselves examples of Christian witnessing.

#2: Let us learn the Christian virtue of tolerance: Christian tolerance asks that we bear with the weaknesses of others, without condoning the evil they do. Intolerance is a sign of a weak faith. Intolerance is also ineffective. It does nothing but damage to the cause it seeks to defend. When we attack a heretic, we don't change his mind, for the most part. We just give him an audience. To ban a book, is, almost surely, to make it a best seller. Condemning a sinner immediately draws people to defend him. An intolerant attitude will alienate, rather than attract, sinners. Only genuine *agape* love can overcome hatred. The Church should display this patient love to a hate-filled world. The Church is expected to present Christ to the world. How can the Church present Christ when it is arrogant or intolerant rather than loving others as Christ loves us? We cannot exalt love by encouraging hate. Hence, let us try both to learn and to practice the virtue of Christian tolerance in our interfaith and ecumenical endeavors by: a) remaining true to our conscience and beliefs, b) respecting the differences we encounter, c) working together on projects of common interest, d) affirming what is good in the other person's position, even when we disagree on certain things, and e) allowing the light of Christ to shine through our loving words and deeds.

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