

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time + 29 Sept 2024 + Mk 9:38-48

Our Gospel today forces us to tackle a rather unpleasant subject, to put it mildly, and that is sin. Unfortunately, sin is often thought of in an overly-legalistic way, as in “break the rules, go to jail.” That problem with that view is that God is then thought of as a sort of policeman or judge. Now I have nothing against the police or judges, I am thankful for them—and there is some truth to this way of seeing things. But it is very deficient, because, above all, we believe in a God who is a Trinity of Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Which means that sin, first and foremost, is an offense against, or a breaking of *relationship*.

And I think it’s only in the light of relationship that we can really understand sin, and ward off the kind of bitterness that likes to speak of so-called “Catholic guilt.” It has been rightly said that “rules without relationship leads to bitterness.” A child, for instance, who grows up in an overly-strict household, devoid of all affection, will probably grow up to be bitter against authority. As Jesus once lamented of the Pharisees, who were obsessed with keeping the letter of the Law to the minutest detail: *This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me (Mt 15:8)*. So it’s not just about rules.

On the other hand, we might also say that “relationship without rules leads, at best, to chaos, at worst, to abuse.” These days, the word “rules” is not very popular, so we might replace “rules” with “boundaries.” Everyone knows that without appropriate boundaries, relationships suffer or even are destroyed. Needy parents who treat their children as friends instead of children, for instance, do great damage to their children. Unhappy spouses who say too much about their marriages to their friends do great damage to the sanctity of their marriage covenant. So boundaries are very important.

All of this is to say, then, that our primary identity, on account of our Baptism, is that we are children of God. That is who we are, above all else. I think we so easily forget this primary identity! We are in relationship with God, as His beloved sons and daughters. Sin, then, is falsifying of this relationship: acting against it, denying it, or even breaking it. There is also a communal aspect to this understanding of sin. Because all of us are baptized into one body, in Christ, when we sin against God, we hurt the whole body. And when we sin against each other, we hurt God, so to speak. More on that in a moment.

Using this relational understanding, we can also speak of our traditional teachings on sin. Sin, the damaging of relationship, is possible because we have *free will*; we are free to choose whether or not to follow God and His ways. Now it’s true, if we were baptized as infants, we did not *choose* to become God’s beloved children of our own free will, but to begrudge this gift makes as much sense as begrudging your parents for giving you the gift of life. Sadly, we know some people feel this way these days, but only when one’s vision is skewed by sin. That is, if we had even a glimpse of how good God is and how much it means to be His beloved, we would never even dream of begrudging our Baptism.

That being said, as we age, we gain more and more freedom, so to speak, so our actions and words take on more gravity. We don't hold 5-year-olds and 35-year-olds to the same degree of responsibility, and neither does God. Even more, sins can vary in gravity: a sin which offends God and *wounds* our relationship with Him is a *venial sin*. A sin which we might say '*banishes*' the love of God in our hearts is called *mortal sin*. For a sin to be mortal, it must be freely chosen, you have to know that what you are doing is wrong, and the action itself must be gravely evil, such as breaking one of the Ten Commandments.

This distinction is helpful, but some people get too caught up on the line between mortal and venial sin and lose sight of the big picture. Obviously, saying an unkind word to one's spouse is not on the same level as cheating on them. A simple 'I'm sorry' is sufficient in the former case; that latter case may take years of rebuilding trust in order to heal. All of that is true. But in the big picture, if you really love your spouse, you don't want to do anything to harm this relationship. That kind of disdain of *all* sin is really the goal for a child of God.

Now, mortal sins must be confessed in kind and number in the Sacrament of Penance. You don't have to go into great detail, you just need to own it, and be contrite—truly sorry for your sins. Many people bristle at this teaching, but recalling the communal reality of sin, it makes perfect sense. We confess to priests not because we need to be humiliated, or because we can't confess our sins to God. There was a long, historical development in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, but in a nutshell, we confess to priests in the Sacrament of Reconciliation because the priest is standing in not just for the Lord Himself, but also for the whole Body of Christ, which we have also wounded. As St. Paul writes in his 1st Letter to the Corinthians, *Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together (12: 27, 26).*

Two final notes. When we speak of sin as "offending God," sometimes people imagine God as a sort of hyper-sensitive God who is just looking for reasons to zap us into hell. But we know that's not true by faith. Parents overlook all sorts of offenses in their children, up to a point. God the Father is not a petty parent. His benevolence looks like the Cross: that's the depths He is willing to go to, in order to be merciful to us. But sin also looks like the Cross: we must never trivialize it. If we trivialize sin, we trivialize the depths of His mercy.

And finally, notice in our Gospel today Jesus speaks of the hand, the foot, and the eyes as "causes of sin." Obviously, He is speaking figuratively here. But this is a good reminder of the importance of the promise we make in the traditional act of contrition to "avoid the near occasion of sin." Sadly, we are bombarded with near occasions of sin these days: online, on tv, you name it. So Jesus uses images here that may seem over the top, but they convey just how serious sin is, and how important it is that we fight it, avoid it, and repent of it. He loves all of His children with a relentless, perfect love. He heart bled for all who choose other relationships over Him—relationships that will never satisfy, but only harm. To willfully deny living in His perfect, eternal love is *Gehenna*, it is hell.