

Kenneth J. Hughes, SJ
St. Mary of the Angels Sunday OT 26B 9/30/18
Numbers 11.25-29; James 5.1-6; Mark 9.38-49

My Brothers and Sisters,

Scandal and Salt.

The Gospel today begins with scandal and ends with salt.

These past weeks, we have been overwhelmed by scandal. Let us acknowledge the scandal but let us focus more on the salt.

First, the scandal.

The first scandal of today's Gospel concerns the attitude of John and his fellow disciples. There is a double scandal here:

1) They don't look at the positive, but focus on the negative. They do not see the joy of people being freed from demons and given new freedom, new life. Rather, they focus on the fact that the man driving out demons is an outsider. Grumble! Grumble! He does not belong to the club.

2) They complain that the man is not following them—emphasis on “them!” “He does not follow us,” John complains. So, it is no longer about following Jesus; it is about following them, the disciples. What arrogance! They have now taken on the role of Messiah and the judge of who belongs and who does not belong, and of who can heal and who cannot. They have now put themselves in the place of God and Jesus. Both actions are sinful and scandalous – both then and now.

But then, Jesus points out the worst scandal of all, a scandal which shows its ugly face in every era: hurting the little ones. By “little ones” Jesus means the most vulnerable people in our society:

**children and the elderly,
those with mental or physical disabilities,
minorities, whether by race or religion,
the homeless and imprisoned, and
women, as this past week has especially highlighted.**

All who vulnerable are the “little ones.”

Jesus goes on to say, “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.” In English, the words here are “to cause to sin.” The Greek word is “scandalizo” literally, to scandalize. To cause to sin is to scandalize and to scandalize means undermining a person’s faith and confidence in God and undermining trust in human relationships.

Jesus, then, points out three areas where we often sin and scandalize, namely, our hands, our feet, our eyes.

Our hands symbolize our actions. Does our work contribute to building up the Kingdom of God or are we working just for ourselves, our security, and our advancement?

Our feet symbolize where we go and where we stand. Do we stand with the powerful or the weak? Are we willing to stand with those who stand beneath the cross? Where do our feet take us: to self service or to service of others?

Our eyes symbolize what we see, but, even more, how we see. Do we see the suffering around us? Do we see with eyes of compassion and love, or with eyes of judgment and criticism?

When Jesus says that it is better to cut off hand and foot or cut out eye than to cause sin and scandal, he is not advocating these drastic measures so much as highlighting how invaluable it is to live in the Kingdom of God. Living consciously with God brings a freedom and joy that is worth every possible sacrifice that we can make. The Kingdom of God is about life, real life, not fake life as advocated by some politicians and promised by the business world.

As we are so aware, so much of the news today is about scandal: church scandal, political scandal, sexual harassment scandal, Jesuit prep school scandal, church leadership scandal, and the entire world has just witnessed a sordid Senate Judiciary scandal.

We are tired, tired, tired, tired of hearing yet another scandal. (And yet fascinated too!) But we should be relieved that all these evils are being exposed and expressed for the evils they are, despite those who pretend otherwise.

And now the salt.

To counteract scandal, Jesus says we need a healthy dose of salt, for salt provides both purification and preservation.

First, we need the salt of purification. Our Cardinal has summoned all of us to prayer and penance:

**for the victims, i.e., those abused,
for the disillusioned, i.e., all those who have felt compelled to the Church,
and for ourselves, for our own failures and for our own hurts and
disappointments and resentment.**

And we can add: for our politics and politicians. They too need our prayer and penance for purification.

But then, we need the salt of preservation. Salt is the great preservative. (As an aside: If it were not for salt, we “Jamaicans” in this community would not enjoy saltfish and ackee as one of our favorite national dishes!) Salt, as we well know, provides taste and preserves food. As spiritual writer, John Shea writes, “Salt is a symbol of highest value. It is a treasure of incalculable worth, so excellent that if its flavor is lost, there is nothing higher that can restore it.” (B-237)

When I speak of preservation, I do not mean preserving our church as it was. I am speaking of the salt of imagination. Salt means imagining a different way of being church: one more inclusive, less clerical, one more collaborative, less hierarchical, one more transparent, less closed, one more forgiving, less judgmental. You of St. Mary of the Angels have much to teach the Archdiocese about imagining a more spontaneous, less controlled, welcoming way of being church. You are the salt! Let us not lose our saltiness!

Lastly and most basically, salt symbolizes a healthy, vibrant relationship with God. That is why Jesus concludes our Gospel today with the words, “Keep salt in yourselves, and you will have peace with one another.” That is, he promises that, with the salt of our friendship with God, nourished by the salt of purification and preservation, peace with one another will follow. Let the final word therefore be, not scandal, not even salt, but peace the peace, despite all obstacles, of belonging to God and God’s Kingdom even now, and right here.

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