

PENTECOST XVI I

“Whoever is not against us is for us.” Mark 9 40

Whoever is not against us is for us. One of my favorite lines of all Scripture. So hopeful, so inclusive, so promising – and so very difficult to remember and to live by!

The Gospel from Mark goes on to be not so much fun. Jesus talks about the penalties and punishments in store for those who cause others to sin, and the warnings are harsh. *If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off!* Jesus orders. *If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off!* These amputation metaphors and their references to the fires of hell are painful to hear. They sound of damnation, not grace.

But Jesus was speaking metaphorically. His audience would have known that he was employing familiar proverbs of the day to make his point. But his point is real: if we are responsible for the sins of others we are in mortal spiritual danger. By sin here Jesus seems to mean loss of faith, as he says, *If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck.*

I’ve been thinking about those stumbling blocks. My focus, truly, has been on what prevents us, personally, from being as open and receptive as possible to the grace of God and the blessings of community. But of course, we live and we teach by example, we invite by example, and as followers of Jesus, how we live and act exemplifies to others – or does not – the qualities of Christian discipleship. And so it follows that whatever we can do to remove the stumbling blocks between us and God’s grace, the more open we will be to others, the more effective and loving disciples we will be.

The stumbling blocks that came to the surface of my meditations seem to be interconnected, perhaps inseparable from one another, and I guess that’s not surprising. Here are several, in no particular order.

The inability or reluctance to apologize for an honest mistake. This is a big stumbling block, and I suspect I’ve talked about it from the pulpit before. One of my biggest learnings in life has been the value of a sincere apology. When I have hurt someone inadvertently by being insensitive, or losing my temper, by some careless oversight, or by misunderstanding, saying *I’m sorry* can cut through so much wasteful time and trouble!

Now, the conditions I list which put me in a position to apologize suggest some of my shortcomings, as I understand them. I can be short tempered and impatient. I can focus on tasks at the expense of process. I'm not always the most intuitive of people. And as far as I know myself, these are some of the traits that cause me to hurt or offend other people. And when these deficiencies get me into trouble, and I'm aware of the damage I've done, I have no trouble saying *I'm sorry*.

But it is my observation that many, many people will go to any lengths to avoid apologizing. I don't pretend to understand why. I used the word "inadvertently" when I described how I think I mostly hurt other people, and I used it because I believe that while I have many flaws, I'm not a spiteful or vengeful or generally mean and destructive person. I have revenge *fantasies*, sure, but I try not to act on them.

And I don't think I'm so unusual. Insofar as I know all of you in this community, and as I know human nature generally, I believe that most of us are not mean and destructive by nature. So if we hurt or offend people by mistake, why are apologies so difficult?

I have no answers, but I have a couple of thoughts. A fairly simple and common reason why people don't apologize, I believe, is *confusion between intention and impact*. How many, many times have we heard the excuse, "but I didn't mean to..." or "what I meant was..." Sometimes we believe these protestations, they seem genuine enough. At other times, they seem like naïve or even bogus rationalizations. As I say, I like to believe that, more often than not, most people's *intentions* are good and honorable.

But we are all flawed people, all broken and imperfect. And we may be blind to our own subconscious motivations. But more important for this discussion, what we *intended* may have little resemblance to the *impact* we've had on someone else.

St. Thomas Aquinas says, *What is received is received according to the manner of the receiver*. This is a bit of an archaic formulation, but I have found it a great comfort in times of trial, times when I've felt particularly misunderstood or maligned. Once my words and actions are out in the world, they will be *received according to the manner of the receiver*. I have lost control of their impact, their outcome.

All too often we never know that that impact, those outcomes, may be. I am always grateful when somebody tells me how I've affected them. The knowledge may be painful, but it does allow me to try to make amends. And while explaining my intent may be helpful, it does not erase the impact. I try to understand that, to listen to what the impact has been and to address that as best I can.

Other reasons that people have trouble apologizing or making amends or reaching out to others in love and concern? I think *shame and secrecy* play a big role here. We all have parts of ourselves that we try to keep hidden from others, we all have areas where our self-esteem is low. We suffer – we are often crippled, by self-blame, and these dark and hidden areas of self are huge stumbling blocks to receiving the grace of God and offering it to others.

For some of us, shame and secrecy have to do with an addiction of one kind or another. For me, as most of you know, it was an addiction to alcohol. For some of us our sense shame and secrecy may have to do with an abusive or destructive relationship we are in or have been in, our need to cover-up, to present a façade that all is well. Some of us are burdened by family secrets from the past – or indeed, the present – that we hesitate to share for fear of ridicule or judgment.

I could go on and on. But you will get my point. And our burdens of shame and secrecy cause us to build barriers to protect and conceal what we are trying to hide. We become well defended, and thus, we become defensive. And *defensiveness* is a huge stumbling block, a huge obstacle between us and the giving and receiving of God’s grace.

We try to hard to create and then defend a version of ourselves that we want other people to believe in and to accept. But whom do we think we’re kidding? Ourselves? God? Our friends and associates?

These false images are idols, really, and they are in the end death dealing, I believe. I remember when my first marriage broke up. A dear and close friend to both my husband and me said, “but you made the surface look so good. “ And the surface did look good. We were a privileged, bright, attractive, young couple who got along agreeably, had lots of friends, and had a world of promise ahead of us. Except, as it turned out rather quickly, we didn’t really share much passion for one another or for anything else.

And our good-looking surface did no one any favors. Our happy façade isolated us from real deep friendships or confidences, and at the same time, I think, made many of our circle feel inadequate because they hadn’t yet formed “happy marriages.” The breakup of that marriage was humbling and life- altering in many ways, mostly I think because my young husband and I both had our first experiences of discovering, and having everyone else discover, that we were not two golden kids who were going to live out some ideal script for success and happiness.

We were just as human, just as fallible, as everyone else, it turned out. And that recognition, devastating as it was, hastened our maturity, increased our openness to

others, deepened our compassion. We discovered our own human frailty, and became, I believe, better people for that.

Divorce is no easy or fun route to self-awareness and human connectedness. But my point is that we've all fallen down somewhere along our way in life, we all have histories and personal qualities that we are not proud of. We *all* do. And we don't need to share every detail of those unwelcome aspects of ourselves and our lives; we don't need to be in permanent confessional mode. But to the extent that we are burdened by shame, secrecy, as long as we expend inordinate energy on keeping our defenses up and refusing to acknowledge mistakes or wrong-doing, we are our own worst stumbling blocks. We are ineffective ministers of God's grace.

And I think that's what Jesus is condemning here. I think he's saying, get out of your own way, folks! He finishes up his remarks in this portion of the Gospel by saying, *Salt is good, but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.* Again, here's a proverbial saying that Jesus' audience would have understood. Salt was a valuable commodity, and eating salt with someone was a sign of friendship and loyalty. Hebrew Scripture talks about "the salt of the covenant."

So Mark may understand the sayings about salt as a general exhortation to hospitality and covenant loyalty. Mark has Jesus commend communal solidarity as a rule of life. We should not assume that the way we live our lives is simply a private matter. Nor should we not wait for personal crisis to look for support from others, we should make a habit and a discipline – a happy discipline – of reaching out to, and sharing with, others, in times of joy as well as in times of sorrow.

Or, as James says in his epistle for today, *Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of God. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and God will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.*

As pastoral advice, this is unbeatable. And along with that, remember, my dear friends. *Whoever is not against us is for us.* Alleluia ! Amen