

Today's gospel uses language that gets our attention. Among the Lord's phrases we find, "He who is not against us is for us." Immediately after Nine – Eleven, George Bush said the same sort of thing, "You are either with us or against us," in the war on terrorism. This kind of language draws a line in the sand. You are friend or foe, enemy or ally. Jesus used the phrase to differentiate between those that did or did not support his messianic ministry. As far as Jesus was concerned, there can be no equivocation. You are either on God's side or the devil's, the side of Heaven or the side of hell. The tone of this makes us uncomfortable. It is confrontational. Confrontation is scary. Most people avoid confrontation, if they can.

There is no doubt that the gospel today is confrontational. You are either right or you are wrong, you are either on the good side or the bad side, and the good side is the Lord's side, because it is the side of the Kingdom of God. Jesus continued his comments with some of the strongest and most difficult demands to be found anywhere in Holy Scripture. "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out." Preachers often try to soften this, or tap dance around it. Some preachers ignore it, as if they can pick and choose what they like from God's Word.

I think that often the clergy are afraid of this passage. They don't want to frighten off their congregations. But, a reality is that Jesus did not intend that what he had to say to us be soft. The Lord did not care about what feels good to us. He fully intended to be confrontational. This was "in your face" stuff. Jesus was making a most important point: the one thing that ultimately matters, for every one of us, is our salvation. Are we included in the Kingdom of God?

There is a children's song about "Heaven's door." The lyrics tell us that there is one door and you are either on the inside or the outside. Today's gospel passage is difficult and it is one subject to misinterpretation. But if we are true to the biblical text, we have to acknowledge that it reports Jesus as teaching that you are either on his side or you are not; you are on the side of God or you are not!

To understand this passage, we really must keep it in its context. We use a lectionary for our Sunday readings. Using the lectionary keeps the preacher honest. In other words, the preacher doesn't pick the passage for his sermon; the lectionary tells us which readings to use. This keeps us moving appropriately through the biblical texts and allows themes to develop. For the last several weeks, working our way through Mark's gospel, we've explored the cost of discipleship, which is the cost of self-sacrifice. To remind you once again, Jesus said that if we want to follow him, we have to be prepared to take up our cross and follow. Today's reading is a continuation of that theme, a theme he developed as he walked through the region of Galilee towards Jerusalem. This was his final journey. At Jerusalem waited the Cross.

Even though Easter was Christ's victory, the victory came through the valley of death. Jesus said that his disciples would follow the same path. By following Jesus, they faced the same battleground, the same enemy, and in the face of very real danger, even the strong might falter.

Jesus reminded them of what really matters: salvation, eternal peace with God. Suffering is transient, and so is death. What is on the other side of death? What is on the other side of the door? For Jesus, the question was black and white. On the other side of death there is either heaven or hell. So, if your eye is the cause of your sin, pluck it out. Figurative language, yes; but language you will remember.

Jesus told his disciples that their immediate future carried with it significant risk to the soul. In the language of soldiers, the pathway of life is a path through a minefield. The only safe way is following the footsteps of Jesus. He has gone the way; he has walked the walk. He takes us along the safe route to Heaven.

Today's gospel is in the same vein as the last several weeks. The most important thing is the state of your soul. Jesus must come first. The language is tough. We can treat the language figuratively, and we should. Jesus used it figuratively, so we can put the bone saws away. But, there is no question that our Lord was serious about this. If we would follow Jesus, if we would be disciples, if we would attain a place in the Kingdom of God, then we must let nothing stand in our way. We must examine ourselves and find each stumbling block. We must identify them through introspection and exceptional honesty, and cut them off or rip them out. If this is difficult to hear, we should remember to keep it in tension with the assurance that Christ died so that our failures would not be final. But, let's not be guilty of the blasphemy that surely comes from not taking seriously our Lord's call to a devout and holy life. *Amen.*