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Harmony, Humility

10.01.2009 | Catholic

(Readings: Numbers 11: 25-29; Psalm 19; James 5: 1-6; Mark 9: 38-43, 45, 47-48)

There is so much good news here; I don't know where to start.

- Jealousy.
- Rash judgment.
- Taking advantage of the poor.
- "Come now, you rich, weep and wail over your impending miseries."
- Cut off your hand and pluck out your eye.

Ah, yes. "The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart!"

Well, let's start with jealousy. The scriptures today address that jealousy which resents the good work that God does in and through other people who are not part of our inner circle, our sphere of influence. Joshua is upset that Eldad and Medad received the spirit of God and were gifted with prophecy even though they had not shown up at the tent of the meeting at the assigned time. In the Gospel, John is concerned that someone is casting out demons in Jesus' name, even though that person "does not follow us." In both cases, these are petty jealousies trying to work against the Spirit of God, trying to control and limit the power of God to act in our world and in the lives of others. This, we are clearly told, is foolish:

"There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name who can at the same time speak ill of me. Whoever is not against us is for us."

And Moses says, quite prophetically himself:

"Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets! Would that the Lord might bestow his spirit on them all."

"Of course!" we say. We would never limit the Spirit of God to our inner circle. We would never deny that the Lord can work powerfully and effectively among others; we would never be jealous and treat as rivals or opponents those who share our faith in Jesus and who strive to spread the good news of the kingdom of God.

Well, before we get too comfortable and smug, dear Red Scare Flyer Faithful types, I have two words to say to you: Xavier Musketeers. People from Xavier — and from all Jesuit universities — are children of God, too. I am sure of it. In fact, I thank God for the Jesuits — for their influence in the church, in the world and especially in Catholic education. I also thank God that I am a Marianist and not a Jesuit.

This is all a way of saying that the question of jealousies within the Christian community is a very contemporary issue for all of us. Many of these jealousies are much more damaging to the Body of Christ than spirited athletic rivalries. The world of ministry is especially prone to the temptation to be resentful of the spiritual gifts or successes of others. The Spirit of God can and does work in other world religions. The Holy Spirit can and does work in other Christian churches, denominations and para-church organizations. And though we may not like to admit this, these other churches and groups may have more developed expressions of certain dimensions of life in Christ than those of us who are Catholic do: a better spirit of evangelization; a deeper familiarity with the Scriptures; a stronger practice of a particular form of prayer. Are we willing to acknowledge and respect the Spirit of God at work in other Christians?

And, what about the jealousies and rivalries within the Catholic Church? Our current bipolar, dysfunctional climate in politics has infected the church, and we have allowed it to divide us into camps of rivals on the left and on the right, modeled after U.S. politics, not after the unity we are called to in Christ. Even in some Catholic-affiliated media, we are developing a tone of incivility, fostered by our cultural appetite for angry accusation and inflammatory posturing, by our juvenile preference for

sensational, self-righteous accusation over thoughtful, measured discourse tempered by humility and generosity.

This is a critical moment in the Catholic Church in the U.S. and beyond:

- Will we love our neighbors across the political divide?
- Will we stop name-calling and rash judgments?
- Will we stop assuming that no good spirit can be at work in these people who disagree with me?
- Or will we continue to give scandal to the Church and the world by our angry jealousies and indignant disunity?

Jesus says, "Whoever is not against us is for us." If we are truly for Christ, then we are on thin ice if we put ourselves against other Christians. Will we seek reconciliation and a way forward together, or will we continue to give our young people every excuse to not be Catholic — to not to be Christian — because we clearly don't practice what we preach, because we clearly don't love our neighbors as ourselves even within our own communion, not to mention those with whom we have larger differences?

"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."

These are strong words. Maybe they apply to us. Are we listening?

Jesus gives us strong medicine for this disease that has infected us. He tells us to cut off and pluck out those parts of ourselves which are the root of our sin. This is obviously the language of hyperbole. Jesus doesn't want us to maim ourselves. He means for us to take drastic measures, to undergo radical surgery, if necessary, to separate from ourselves those things that would otherwise separate us from Christ. It is never our hand, our feet, or our eye that causes us to sin. Rather, it is some weakness, some unhealed wound, some tragic flaw, some hurt or twisted or underdeveloped part of ourselves seeking fulfillment in all the wrong places.

What are we to do? Cut off not our hands or feet, but our jealousies. Pluck out the rivalries, animosities and selfish ambition in our hearts. Cut off the hate speech. Pluck out the self-righteous attitude and replace it with humility, gratitude and generosity. Remove the log in our own eye before we attempt to remove the splinter in our neighbor's eye.

What are we to do? The letter of James says that those of us with wealth should use it for the needs of the poor. We cannot afford to let it pile up as a testimony of our callous indifference to those who suffer from need. Pay the laborer her fair wage. And, as the U.S. bishops have urged us, make sure that she, and everyone, has access to affordable, quality health care. I imagine that if James were writing today, he might say, "Behold, the wages (and the health care) you have withheld from the workers who harvested your fields are crying aloud ... they have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts."

Jesus also calls for positive action:

"Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ, amen, I say to you, will surely not lose his reward."

A simple gesture of hospitality or kindness or generosity, made in Christ's name because that one belongs to Christ, goes a long way toward healing the animosity and jealousy among us — whether it be within the Catholic communion, or among Christians of different traditions. It even seems to work among those who don't believe in Christ at all.

Our faith in Jesus Christ calls us to a radical openness to others — to those we might prefer to exclude from our circles. It calls us to take decisive action to cut out those attitudes and behaviors that could cut us off from Christ and from our neighbors. It calls us to use our gifts and our wealth to help the poor, the hungry, the sick and the oppressed.

As we pray for reconciliation and unity among Christians and in the world, let us hold in hope the words of God which come through Moses:

"Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets! Would that the Lord might bestow his spirit on them all!"

And upon us all.