

LOOKING TO SUNDAY®

Sunday, September 27, 2015

This email, entitled Looking to Sunday®, focuses on the Gospel Reading for the coming Sunday. It prepares readers to hear God's Word at Mass and it offers a point of reflection to consider in the days leading to Sunday. Looking to Sunday is written by Father Tom Iwanowski.

CUT IT OFF?

Sometimes churches have outdoor signs with positive, welcoming words from Jesus chosen from the Gospels. For example: "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28) "Take courage, I have conquered the world." (John 16:33) "The Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost." (Luke 19:10)

But few churches would post the following words of Jesus from this Sunday's Gospel (Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48) on their outdoor sign, "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off ... if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off ... and if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out."

Those words, which seem to call upon followers of Jesus to practice self-mutilation, are hardly the inviting words a congregation would choose to display to the public. In fact, they are words that most Christians would hear with a shudder and then seemingly ignore. After all, we do not see Christians cutting off parts of their body in order to ensure they do not fall back into certain sins.

Even Jesus, who gave that instruction, did not oblige those he forgave to do what he commanded in this Sunday's Gospel. For example, Zacchaeus, the dishonest tax collector, was not required to cut off the hand he had used to cheat his fellow Jews.

Perhaps we might better understand those words of Jesus by considering the phrase that accompanies each command to cut off a part of our body. The hand, the foot, the eye that "causes you to sin" is to be removed. But the parts of our body do not cause us to sin. Our hand does not control what we do, our foot does not determine where we go, and our eye does not govern what will hold our attention.

We determine whether or not we will sin. We decide whether we will use our hands to reach out to the poor or to steal an object from work. We decide whether our feet will take us into church on Sunday or into the shopping mall. We decide whether our eyes will look at images that uplift the human spirit or those that glorify violence and debase men, women, and children.

Jesus says that those who choose to do right will be rewarded; even a simple act of kindness will not go unnoticed. "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."

But those who decide to use their hands, feet, and eyes to do wrong risk being "thrown into Gehenna, where the worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched."

Perhaps when we are faced with a decision on how to act, we might follow the custom of the early Christians. Rather than making the sign of cross over the upper part of their body as we do today, they would trace the cross on their forehead. Something we still do just before the

Gospel reading. Silently tracing the cross on our foreheads might make us pause and consider the decision we were about to make. It might cause us to decide to use our hands, our feet, our eyes, and all parts of our bodies to do what God expects of us.

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