

Parker Palmer’s definition of community bursts the balloon of our idealized and romanticized notions of life together: when the person you have the most trouble with leaves, someone rises up to take their place. That is community!

Bonhoeffer said our first impulse in any community is to determine our place in the pecking order. Am I smarter, stronger, prettier, funnier, happier, richer? Where is my toehold, my place to stand in this group? Whatever group we enter into we look for a way to feel secure in relation to others.

The Gospel for today (Mark 9:38-50) is a collection of sayings linked by their relationship to a community. The disciples are concerned that someone who is not part of their community is trading on Jesus’ name, probably for personal profit. The disciples want to protect their franchise; Jesus is more interested in healing than in accruing stock for his company.

In the third century, Bishop of Carthage, St Cyprian wrote: “Outside the church there is no salvation.” Talk about an exclusive community! On the other hand, Augustine wrote in a sermon: “How many sheep there are without, how many wolves within?” Most of us, I suspect, would side with Augustine. Recent events evidence all too tragically the unconscionable number of wolves within.

Simone Weil, raised as a secular Jew, never saw the possibility of a real contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God. In 1938 she spent ten days attending all the liturgical services at the abbey of Solesme in northern France, plunging herself into the chants. While there she was introduced to George Herbert’s Poem, “Love”.

She recited the poem as a prayer. During one of these recitations, she says, Christ himself came down and took possession of her. Neither her senses nor her imagination had any part; she only felt the presence of love, like that which one can read in the smile of a beloved face.

Even so, she refused to be baptized into the Catholic Church because of the doctrine of eternal damnation. She knew the power of evil; she died working in the French resistance to Hitler. But she could not commit herself to an institution that claimed the authority to pronounce eternal judgment on anyone.

Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel was not so reticent. At the 50th anniversary of the camp’s liberation he prayed: “Those who are here remember the nightly marches into the gas chambers of children, and more children, and more children. Frightened, quiet. So quiet and so beautiful. If we could see just one of them our heart would break. But did it break the hearts of the murderers? O God, O merciful God, do not have pity on those who did not have mercy on Jewish children.”

This powerful prayer against forgiveness is related to the passage from Mark, not only by the general theme of divine judgment, but also by the specific subject of abuse and murder of children:

“And whoever offends against one of these little ones . . . it would be better for him to have a millstone hung around his neck and for him to be cast into the sea.”

The backdrop for this judgement is the murder of Jews under the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes near the beginning of the second century BCE. If pious Jewish men, women and children were being brutally tortured and martyred for their faith, if the wicked were seeming to triumph in this world, where was the balance and justice in the universe? Somehow God had to make everything even, to reward the righteous and punish the wicked. If he didn't do so in this life, he would have to do so in the next.

The admonition to cut off the hand, the foot, to pluck out the eye, punishment in the present, is an attempt to avoid eternal damnation, to escape the immortal worms within and the unquenchable fire without. The context suggests that a member of the community who is leading others astray must be removed for the sake of the “little ones” remaining.

Amputating the hand or foot (euphemisms in Hebrew scripture for male genitalia) may limit the execution of illicit desire but it will not address the desire itself. The “hand” and “foot” are means to an end, an end entertained in the imagination.

Read metaphorically, the admonition is not to literal amputation but to removing offenders from the community so they no longer have opportunity to act. That does not mean move them to an unsuspecting parish. It means depriving them of position and power to do harm.

You may not want to take the offender out to sea, hang a millstone around his neck and throw him overboard . . . unless, of course, it is you daughter or son, granddaughter or grandson who has been abused. This execution, however, is not an act of vengeance but a punishment of the offender in this life to save him from eternal torment.

While salt cannot literally lose its saltiness, a community can lose its character, even its reason for being. Precious communal identity and purpose is compared to salt for at least three reasons:

- In ancient times, salt was valuable for preserving meat and fish. Discipline is the salt that preserves the holiness/wholeness of the community.

- Sharing salt signified friendship and common mission. The common mission of the community requires its members “Be at peace with each other.”

- Salting an open wound, however painful, leads to healing. Losing a community member, however hard, may be necessary for the sake of the “little ones”.

These are sobering words, not to be acted on quickly or lightly. But this Gospel reminds us of our responsibility to add to the holiness of the group and avoid practices that might harm others.