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“The spirit came to rest on them also” (Numbers 11:27).

Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Nm 11:25-29; Ps 19; Jas 5:1-6; Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

News reports say that the Taliban in Afghanistan will reinstate cutting off hands to deter theft and other crimes. The brutal, medieval practice makes literal what Jesus only proposed as metaphor and hyperbole to bring home with dramatic force the need to preserve your soul at any cost. Better to enter paradise maimed than let an eye or an arm and a leg be the cause of your eternal damnation. Jesus spoke of the need to let go of other attachments that might keep someone from entering the kingdom of God, including money in the case of the rich young man who goes away sad because he can't relinquish his wealth.

The Letter of James also warns the wealthy and self-satisfied that they are cutting themselves off from God by their lack of justice and compassion. This echoes Jesus' question, "What would it profit a man to gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his soul?" (Mark 8:36).

The idea of cutting off or being cut off also underlies the story in Numbers about Medad and Eldad, who were not with the others in the tent but began to prophecy in the camp. Moses is told to cut them off from the privilege of being prophets because they weren't officially designated. The story is repeated in today's Gospel when the Apostle John tells Jesus that someone not from their group is driving out demons in his name. In both stories, the response is the same. If someone is not against you, they are for you. If the Spirit is at work outside official circles, who are you to question God's freedom to empower outsiders for the same purpose?

Years ago, a homilist observed that talent and official roles do not always go together in the church. He said, tongue in cheek perhaps, that this affirms "the freedom of the Holy Spirit to give charisms where there are no offices and the freedom of the church to give offices where there are no charisms." This begs the question why bland bureaucrats often advance to the episcopacy while dynamic leaders are passed over. Or why candidates in seminaries with no apparent preaching skills or readiness to do pastoral work are advanced to ordination while others are dismissed for showing independence or asking too many questions. While Jesus' disciples, like the scribes and Pharisees, wanted to narrow the circle of

the qualified to protect their own status, Jesus saw the Spirit at work outside the group. The question was this: Where is the Spirit moving and how can this holy wind be harnessed to propel the church forward?

The challenge also asks why qualified, motivated women are being excluded from the altar, pulpit and sacramental ministry, effectively cutting off half the potential leaders the church says it needs as it laments a vocations shortage? A rule to protect male clericalism suggests another saying: "It's like cutting off your nose to spite your face."

Pope Francis' bid to bring synodality to the church is a clear move to revive the intent of Vatican II to call all the baptized into "full, active, conscious participation" in the church's worship and mission. This may be the last chance to tap into the energies swirling about in today's world trying to break through the resistance to a renewal and a rebirth of hope so needed especially by young people.

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