

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

As Catholics we believe the Scriptures reveal the truth of our salvation—they are not books of fact. Jesus was a skilled and powerful communicator. And like all great teachers he used metaphor and exaggeration to make his point. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus takes evil very seriously. He is always conscious of it around him and is aware that it comes from within us, and without us. Jesus teaches us today to stop doing the destructive things that prevent us from loving God, each other and ourselves.

Sinful behavior often falls into two categories of human activity: habitual and compulsive. Habits are unusual things. There are good habits, like saying "please" and "thank you." There are habits that can start out well-intentioned enough, but end up being obsessions, like caring for one's physical fitness. And there are habits that bring moments of relief or let us off the hook—like lying, dishonesty and stealing—but always end up being destructive.

Compulsive behavior, however, is of a very different order. Gambling, drinking, shopping, smoking, violence, work, sex, eating, drugs, pornography, money and the Internet are fairly common modern manifestations of compulsive behavior. As heart-breaking as these addictions are, they are the presenting problems of deeper issues related to self-esteem, personal history and even genetic disposition.

One of the comments I've heard people make about their compulsive behavior is, "I found myself doing it again and I am not sure how or why." No doubt there are some people who feel so lonely and get so depressed about their habitual or compulsive behavior, they contemplate severing an arm, a leg or gouging an eye.

Jesus underlines that we have to stop our destructive behavior and offers three pieces of practical advice so we can. Firstly, do whatever helps. For some people the most unusual solutions attend to the deeper issues and help us piece our lives back together. It doesn't matter whether others approve of it, or it's related to religious faith, for as long as it doesn't lead to other destructive behavior then, "whoever (or whatever) is not against us, is for us."

Secondly, accept help. None of us can battle through life carrying all our burdens on our own. Steps four to six of Alcoholics Anonymous deal with sharing the exact nature of our burdens as a means to coming to terms with them. Our family and friends are not mind readers and we need to seek out wise counsel and follow it wisely. The help and support we receive could be like the cup of refreshing water Jesus tells us about today.

Finally, habitual and compulsive behavior always has a pattern. St Ignatius Loyola taught in the sixteenth century that it was only when we regularly examined ourselves to see where, when, how and with whom we are most likely to walk away from God's love, that we can work out why we do it and change the pattern.

And when we really know ourselves as we are, and not as we would like to be, we have the chance to choose life over death more often than not.

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