

Two men, both seriously ill, occupied the same hospital room. One man was allowed to sit up in his bed for an hour each day to help drain the fluid from his lungs. His bed was next to the room's only window. The other man had to spend all his time flat on his back.

The men talked for hours on end. They spoke of their wives and families, their homes, their jobs, where they had been on vacation. Every afternoon, when the man by the window could sit up, he would pass the time by describing to his roommate all the things he could see outside the window.

The man in the other bed began to live for those one-hour periods where his world would be broadened and enlivened by all the activity and color of the world outside. The window overlooked a park with a lovely lake. Ducks and swans played on the water while children sailed their model boats. Young lovers walked arm in arm amidst flowers of every color and a fine view of the city skyline could be seen in the distance. As the man by the window described all this in exquisite detail, the man on the other side of the room would close his eyes and picture it in his mind.

Months passed. One morning, a nurse arrived to bring water for their baths only to find the lifeless body of the man by the window, who had died peacefully in his sleep. She was saddened and called the hospital attendants to take the body away. As soon as it seemed appropriate, the other man asked if he could be moved next to the window. The nurse was happy to make the switch, and after making sure he was comfortable, she left him alone.

Slowly, painfully, he propped himself up on one elbow to take his first look at the real world outside. He strained slowly turning to look out the window beside his bed. It faced a blank wall. The man asked the nurse what could have compelled his deceased roommate to have described such wonderful things outside the

window. The nurse responded that the man was blind and could not even see the wall. She said, "Perhaps he just wanted to encourage you."

We all need a bit of encouragement or motivation in our lives, don't we? A reason for getting out of bed in the morning! Some kind of incentive that can inspire us to live a happier, more successful life! Especially when we have certain goals that we are trying to reach.

If we want to get good grades in school, lose weight, advance ourselves in our careers, it helps if we are motivated! I'm sure many of us have come across at least a few motivational self-help books, or know the names of at least one motivational speaker. Perhaps we have seen motivational posters hanging on the walls in offices, hospitals, or even have some decorating our homes? I know that I really enjoy them, especially the cute ones like: "Live Well, Love Much, Laugh Often!" "Fairy tales do come true!" "Wish it, Dream it, Do it!" and my favorite, "Good morning this is God...I will be handling all your problems today!"

Now, I'm sure we can all agree that Jesus words of warning to his disciples in our Gospel story for today are not part of a feel-good, adorable, or even charming motivational message! He does not use his words lightly as he suggests it would be better for them to drown in the sea, or cut of their body parts, than for them to be thrown into hell! Following the disciples' argument over who is greatest among them, and even after Jesus tries to teach them to be non-exclusive as he sets a child before them, they still do not know what it means to belong to Christ or to act as his representatives. The disciples fail to comprehend the type of relationship that Jesus wants them to have with each other and with all people. Although they have witnessed him interacting with all sorts of undesirables and outcasts, he ate with them, touched them, conversed with them, they still possess an attitude of insider vs. outsider.

The problem with this mentality is that it can cause others to stumble in their faith and if they begin to doubt then there is a danger that they would stop serving the Lord. Think about it, the disciples complain to Jesus that a man who is not part of their group is casting out demons. If this unknown exorcist had listened to their criticisms, he may have quit helping possessed people, and ironically he would have quit helping the Lord's followers as well. After all, the work the man was doing was actually a benefit to the disciples, not a hindrance. The problem is that the disciples fail to see the motivation behind his actions (maybe this is a hint at why Jesus says it is better to cut out one's eyes) and instead they focus their gaze on their own desires and impulses.

Imagine telling a man to stop casting out demons when they had recently failed to deliver a deaf and dumb boy from Satan's power earlier in Mark's Gospel. As usual they don't understand and therefore Jesus teaches them and us that to use his name, or to even be associated with his name, is the same as working under his authority, and therefore they had no right to stop him. In fact, let's take a look at their complaint against him. "He was not following us!"

They know the exorcist is acting in Jesus' name. The problem is that he doesn't belong to their group. Which begs the question, are there ever times when we can relate to the disciples' attitude and outlook, where we tend to be a bit exclusive of those outside of our group who may be different from us. I have heard countless stories from adults in the different congregations that I have served who have told me that when they were growing up it was frowned upon to interact with children of other denominations, especially if those children were Catholic.

The foolish and oblivious disciples saw themselves as the only ones authorized to do God's work in the world, rather than looking at the motivations or reasons behind why they were called to serve God. Thankfully after Jesus dies and they encounter the risen Christ they begin to live their lives with the sole purpose

of telling others about his resurrection. Eventually their lives are completely and utterly devoted to Christ!

At this point in our story, however, we might wonder if they are “insiders” or “outsiders?” The disciples don’t understand what rising from the dead means, they are unable to cast out a demon, they don’t understand Jesus’ passion/resurrection prediction. They argue about who is the greatest...Does their lack of understanding make them the “outsiders,” while this unnamed exorcist may be an “insider” even though he doesn’t belong to their group? An unnamed professor of theology once said, “Whenever you want to draw lines in order to mark who is outside the kingdom and who is inside, always remember: Jesus is on the other side of the line! In the Gospels he is always with the outsiders!

So, what criteria should we use to determine if someone is “of Christ” or not? Where does active church membership fall within our requirements for being “of Christ?” What if, rather than “active church membership,” we call it “Being part of the body of Christ?” Can one be “of Christ” and not be an integral part of the “body of Christ?”

Thankfully it is not necessary to perform great miracles like exorcisms to prove our love for Christ! When we lovingly receive a child or compassionately share a cup of cold water, we are giving evidence that we have the humble heart of a servant. It’s possible for us to tell if someone is for Christ, or if they are a believer, through their words, actions, and by their willingness to serve! As his modern disciples we are called to worship God, serve God, and Jesus adds something else into the mix in our story! We need to avoid causing others to stumble while looking at our one true motivator for doing things; we are to do them “in Jesus’ name.” Bearing his name and acting in his name indicate belonging to Christ!

Jesus does not treat the disciple's criticisms against the exorcist lightly! "These little ones" he mentions refers to all God's children who follow Christ and seek to serve him. The way believers treat others in the family of God is a serious thing, and God wants us to "have peace with one another." The disciples did not always get along with each other, nor did they get along with other believers! All of Jesus messages and demonstrations to them about exclusiveness vs. inclusiveness didn't seem to be working, and so he chooses a different kind of motivation. He preaches a solemn message about hell which carries a warning for all of us to deal drastically with sin.

Whatever in our lives makes us stumble, and therefore causes others to stumble, must be removed as if by surgery. The hand, foot, and eye would be considered valuable parts of the body, yet they must be removed if they are causing sin. Of course, the Lord is not commanding literal physical surgery, since he had already made it clear that sin comes from the heart. What he is teaching is that sin is to the inner person, what a cancerous tumor is to the body, and it must be dealt with drastically.

What other body parts could Jesus have mentioned that might be more relevant to most of our sinful behaviors? What if our tongues cause us to stumble? Have any of us ever uttered a swear word, an unkind word, a four-letter naughty word? Do we need to cut out our tongues? What if our brain causes us to stumble? Have we ever had a sinful thought, a lustful longing, a desire to kill? Do we need a lobotomy?

We need to remember that our entire body is sinful. Every part leads us astray and away from God. So, if that is truly the case, what does Christ demand we do with our sinful parts? They must be cut out, removed. And if we were to do that with our whole bodies, we would die. In other words, Christ demands our deaths. However, Christ also provides for our deaths through our baptism into his

death. Rather than a “chop-chop” and a removal of limbs or organs, we can remember a “splash-splash” of death and new life given to us in baptism.

Another way that we die to ourselves is through repentance. Especially when we define repentance as an “I can’t experience.” It is admitting the helplessness of our situation –and remembering that only with the help of Jesus working in our lives can we truly be transformed. We can look to him for motivation and assurance.

Rather than cutting out our eyes if they cause us to stumble or others to stumble, why not give them over to Jesus asking him to use them. Perhaps with his help we could learn to see the needs of others instead of focusing on our own needs. Instead of chopping off our hands if they cause us to sin, why not offer them to Jesus and let him use them to serve food to the poor, build houses for the homeless, give water to the thirsty and medicine to the sick. Rather than cutting off our legs, why not present them to the Lord and allow him to lead us to wherever he needs us to go?

There are a lot of great motivational quotes we can live by. “Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile.” “The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.” “Life isn’t about finding yourself, it’s about creating yourself!” As inspiring as all of these quotes are to us, I believe that as followers of Christ we are called to find our ultimate motivation in Jesus. “In his name” seems to indicate the motivation by which one does something –welcoming a child, casting out demons, doing deeds of power. Bearing the name of Christ and acting in Christ’s name seems to indicate belonging to Christ or acting as his representative, and perhaps even being Christ’s presence wherever we are at in the World. So let us give our eyes, our hands, our feet, our hearts, our very selves to God so that the Lord can use us to serve others as he has loved and served us.

Thanks be to God! AMEN

