

September 26, 2021

Father Ed's Sunday Reading

(continued)

Many of us will be able to think of people who are a support to us in the living of our baptismal calling. The saints have traditionally played that role in the history of the church. We look to them to show what it means to be the Lord's disciples; they can continue to speak to us across the centuries. People who are much closer to us in time and place may have done the same for us. They show us the Lord's way by living that way themselves. Yet, we are also aware that some people can lead us astray, inviting us to take paths that are not in keeping with our baptismal calling. They can become obstacles to us, tripping us up as we struggle to follow in the way of Christ.

In today's gospel, Jesus shows a strong awareness of these two possibilities. He speaks of the one who gives a cup of cold water to one of his followers and the one who is an obstacle to bring down one of his followers; the one who supports and the one who blocks. Jesus himself had experienced Peter, the leader of the twelve, as an obstacle. When Peter sought to dissuade Jesus from taking the path that God was asking him to take, because it would involve the cross, Jesus rebuked him with the words, 'You are a stumbling block to me' (Mt 16:23). The gospels suggest that Jesus' disciples proved to be stumbling blocks to others on more than one occasion. Mark tells us that when parents were trying to bring their children to Jesus that he might bless them, the disciples spoke sternly to the parents and tried to block the children from reaching Jesus. In today's gospel, we find Jesus' disciples trying to block someone from doing the Lord's work, just because he was not one of them. In response, Jesus rebukes them, 'Do not stop him—Anyone who is not against us is for us.'

Peter and the disciples meant well in all these cases. Even well-meaning people, it seems, can become obstacles to the Lord's work. We can all find ourselves in the role of the stumbling block without realizing it. Thinking that our way is the Lord's way, we can then proceed to try and impose that way on others. The disciples in today's gospel had to learn that their way was, in fact, a much narrower way than the Lord's way, and that their narrow perspective was an obstacle to the Lord's work getting done. Those they judged to be 'not one of us', Jesus regarded as 'for us.' In contrast to his disciples, Jesus was able to recognize and encourage goodness wherever he found it. He knew that the Spirit blows where it wills. He was alert to the signs of the Spirit's presence wherever he came across them. In the same way, Moses in the first reading recognized and rejoiced in the movement of the Spirit in the lives of Eldad and Medad, even though Joshua wanted Moses to stop them prophesying.

We all have a role to play in recognizing and supporting the working of the Spirit in each other. Towards the end of his first letter to the church in Thessalonica, Paul says, 'Do not quench the Spirit.' To quench

the Holy Spirit in others is to become a stumbling block, an obstacle, to God's working in their lives. We can quench the Spirit in others and hinder the good work that God is doing through them for a whole variety of very human reasons. We can be motivated by jealousy, as Moses suggests Joshua was in today's first reading. Like the disciples, we can refuse to acknowledge God's good work in the lives of others because they are not 'one of us', because they belong to a different church or religion or ethnic group. We can be dismissive of the good someone else is doing simply because it is not the way we would have done it, forgetting that the Holy Spirit works in many diverse ways in people's lives. Living as we do in a culture that is awash with obstacles and stumbling stones to God's working in our lives, we who seek to be the Lord's followers need to ensure that we do not become stumbling stones for one another. The Lord looks to us to give the cup of cold water, to nurture what is good in each other, and to rejoice in the working of the Spirit in the lives of others