

Readings: [Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time | USCCB](#)

When I was in my previous assignment in Bellevue, where there were many people of means, I would always feel weird, nervous, when one of our readings was like the letter of James today that speak so harshly against the rich and wealthy... *Come now, you rich, weep and wail over your impending miseries... You have lived on earth in luxury and pleasure... you have fattened your hearts... you have murdered the righteous one...* **But I still love you, you are important, be sure to continue giving financially to the parish!**

Whenever we get harsh in-your-face readings like these, people hear them differently depending on where they stand. Those not rich could think “Yikes, I feel sorry for Jim Bezos...! Glad I’m not filthy rich... I dodged that bullet...” Those who are wealthy might think “oh, well that certainly does not apply to me, I give money to charity, volunteer... glad I dodged that bullet...”

At the end, the message doesn’t seem to apply to anyone! Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news but if you thought you had dodged a bullet today and didn’t have to weep and wail over your impending miseries, sorry, will have to!

These words are very applicable to us all, rich and poor, because they bring to light a certain sin that emerge in every human being... and apparently that sin being spoken of today is so harmful that to draw attention to it, both Jesus and James are warning us that ignoring it will result in the unquenchable fiery pains of Gehenna, so it must be serious. Today, my friends, we reflect on the sin of *convenient ignorance*.

I don't know about you, but I prefer to be ignorant sometimes... after all they do say that ignorance is bliss! There is truth to that... like when I learned how many calories are in a chocolate muffin from Costco... nope, didn't need to know that! Now I can't eat the whole thing in peace!

This sin is more serious than that of course, and it comes up in our lives when we don't want to take responsibility for something, so we ignore it, we ***choose*** to ignore it, to pretend it is not there, and there are two common things we do evade responsibility. 1) We either focus on a life of luxury, in "living the good life," or, 2) we focus on how bad everyone else is living as a measure for how "my life isn't that bad."

James in the second reading tackles that first. He is talking to the rich and wealthy of Jerusalem who just so happened to be the religious leaders. They made a wealth of money by collecting fees and taxes in the temple. People would come, buy animals, and pay for the priests to offer sacrifice in atonement for their sins and on their end, they used that money, not to help people overcome poverty and misery, not to help better society, but on themselves. They ***chose*** to be conveniently ignorant to the needs of those around them because if they lived and felt like they were fine, then to each their own, all is good in the world.

When Jesus came and began speaking out to hold them accountable and get them to actually see the needs of others and do something about it, Jesus became an inconvenience for them because that meant they had to stop ignoring the issue and make changes to their lifestyles... they didn't want to be inconvenienced, so instead they

accuse Jesus, who was doing good work, as creating hostility and the result was: murder, to eliminate Jesus. James is speaking to them after the fact saying: you did this, and you still don't care, you are still choosing ignorance by continuing to live a life of careless luxury at the expense of everyone's misery.

Jesus tackles that second behavior, avoiding responsibility by focusing on the sins of others. He spoke against this many times. In Matthew's gospel he said it in the form of "*why do you notice the splinter in your brother's eye, but can't seem to notice the splinter in your own?*" In today's case, the disciples were so focused on finding others doing "the wrong thing" that even someone's good actions were interpreted as bad... in fact they were trying to stop them... to which Jesus immediately says "what are you talking about? They are doing nothing wrong! They are actually doing the work of God..." And takes it as an opportunity to turn it around... to let them know the severity of this behavior, because if they are so focused on the sins of others, not only could they be condemning people who are actually doing good, but they would be conveniently ignoring the fact that they could be sinning against someone themselves.

When we are so concerned for the sins of others and not our own, then it is difficult to consider the possibility that we might just be part of the problem... understandably so since recognizing that would mean having to make changes... and that is inconvenient.

In both cases, when we choose to ignore our own sin, when we choose to turn a blind eye and evade responsibility, in whatever form

that might be, we are ourselves limiting the work of God on earth, and this brings tremendous consequences in the world, so severe that Jesus and James had to use the image of hell to draw our attention.

What is the work of God? Healing, reconstruction, reconciliation, union, *relationship*. When we chose convenient ignorance, when we choose to not see ourselves as part of the work of God, then we are in fact contributing, not to the Kingdom of God, but the kingdom of Satan: destruction, hate, excess, selfishness, division, abuse... *lack of relationship*... leading to a disbalance in all of creation.

We have a tendency to take sin personally... we only think about how sin is affecting me, and my own relationship with God. This in itself is a type of convenient ignorance because it makes it difficult to see how I might have something to do with the problems of the world, or how I might have any responsibility to what is happening on the other side of the world... and this is where we get to weep and whale over our impending misery, because the truth is, most likely we are.

When our relationship suffers, all of creation suffers. Scripture always makes a connection between how our sinful lives, how our lack of right relationship, always leads also to abuse of all kinds including an abuse of our natural resources and leads to ecological destruction. It uses that image time and time again... from the floods of Noah, to famines...

If my convenient ignorance has me living a life of luxury without a care as to how that effects everyone else: if I don't care how much I myself am contributing to green-house gasses or the destruction of natural resources, if I don't care to think about how my lifestyle is

contributing to deforestation or overfishing, if I myself don't care that what I am consuming is at the expense of child labor or unfair trade practices, then I am part of the problem, I am exploiting my relationships, I am completely rejecting God's good work in the world and that, James and Jesus tells us today, is the same as murder, we are creating Gehenna, hell on earth.

Gehenna... is such an interesting and disturbing image. Back in the day, Gehenna was the place parents would come to offer their children for sacrifice... They would kill them and burn them as offering to the gods, that is before YAHWY put a stop to this practice with Abraham and Isaac. Then it became a dump, where trash and dead bodies would be thrown and incinerated, so you can imagine how the description of hell emerged: the stench of burning trash and decomposing worm-eaten bodies... Jesus uses this dump, Gehenna, as an image of sin, the total destruction of ecology, a total destruction of relationships, it is a big deal.

The church has always been clear about this and more so in recent years, even before the topic of climate change became politicized. From Pope John Paul II to Benedict to Francis, the church is helping us take responsibility to be good stewards of creation because that will also entail being good stewards of one another, and to do that, we have to be willing to be inconvenienced, to examine how we ourselves might be contributing to the lack of relationship in the world and then collectively work together for fair trade, responsible forestry, to end human

trafficking, chose a healthier lifestyle based on consuming what is healthy and enough...

It's not about doing it because we are scared of the fires of hell, Gahanna is already here, fires, destruction, wars and murder continues to happen worldwide...

It's about becoming a channel of restored relationships, where grace of our lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and communion of the Holy Spirit may consume the world in a very different fire, so that as we pray "thy kingdom come," all may realize, it is already here.

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