

**26<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - B - 2006**  
***“Insiders” or “Outsides”***

It seems that Jesus had a double standard: one for those who are outside his circle of followers, and one for those inside his circle of followers. That isn't surprising. After all, we always treat those outside our group differently from those inside our group. In fact, we have developed a clear set of guidelines about who's "in" and who's "out" in a number of areas. Those on the inside get privileges, and outsiders don't. As they say, *“Success doesn't come so much from what you know as from who you know.”*

I'm reminded of the commencement speaker who had his whole talk figured out but was lacking the key word that would help the graduates remember his message forever. As he entered the hall, he noticed the word "PUSH" on the door. *“That's it! Push. That's the word.”* So he gives his address and then says, *“There is one word that will mean the difference between success and failure in your life if you remember it. And that one word is written on the entrance door to this hall.”* So all the graduates turned around to look at the door and read the word "PULL." It isn't what you know, but who you know.

So, when the disciple John whines to Jesus (*You can almost hear him.*), *“Someone is driving out demons in your name and he's not one of us,”* he expects Jesus to rally to his side and get rid of the outsider. But he doesn't. *“Don't stop him.”* Jesus says, *“No one who does great things in my name can an enemy. If he's not against us, he's for us. Heck, anyone who does even little things, like giving someone a drink of water, will be rewarded.”* By this action, Jesus shows remarkable openness to an outsider. He even makes us stop and rethink how we might determine who the outsider might

be. Rather than using the measure of external things, Jesus seems to be measuring more by the condition of a person's heart.

I think rules are good and necessary. But when we emphasize rules above all else, it becomes temptingly easy to judge the good guys from the bad guys. In matters liturgical, good guys follow all the rules to the letter, and the bad guys don't. No doubt when the new changes come, some will be watching to see if we do it right, and if we don't, they will tattle to the bishop. But the real measure is the condition of the priest's heart and the effect on the worshippers. Those who follow all the rules may be very close to God, spiritual and good priests, but so may be ones who stretch a few rules here and there for the sake of their people.

Take the issue of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The church is discouraging general absolution. Some bishops have forbidden it in their dioceses. And some very good priests are holding to this prohibition. But with the big crowds of Christmas and Easter, some of them have instructed those coming to confession to mention only two sins to keep the lines moving. While it respects the letter of the law, it's an abuse of individual confession, as it may be disrespectful to the penitent's needs. The rite calls for the priest to spend time with the penitent as needed. Whereas, another priest, realizing he cannot do justice to the rite because of the numbers for individual confession, uses general absolution to make the experience as meaningful as possible for all. But in so doing, he breaks the rule. Who's the bad guy? Maybe neither. They're both trying to do what is best for their people. When we measure by the standard of love, it is a lot harder to determine who's in and who's out.

By the way, this may be why many didn't like the changes that came with Vatican II. The emphasis changed from the importance of the law to

the importance of love. We knew where we stood in relationship to the law, if we were good or not. But with love, it's a lot harder to know.

While the world tends to be more exclusive of the outsider, Jesus is surprisingly tolerant. But when it comes to the insider, rather than dole out privileges, Jesus demands greater accountability. *"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he be thrown into the sea."* Yikes! And to make his point, Jesus uses hyperbole, exaggeration, about cutting off hands, feet, and plucking out eyes. He's trying to get out attention. Don't give scandal! Whatever humiliation the church has gone through because of the sexual abuse scandal, it deserved. Tragically, many lost their faith because of it. But we don't have to go to such big things to find scandal.

One day a mother took her daughter to see Gandhi. She asked him, *"Would you please help my daughter break her addiction to sweets?"* Gandhi replied, *"Come back in three weeks, and I will help you."* So, after three weeks the mother returned with her daughter. *"Will you help us now?"* she asked. *"Yes,"* Gandhi replied, and then turning to the girl he said, *"Stop eating all those sweets!"* The mother then said, *"You could have said that three weeks ago. Why did you wait till now?"* And Gandhi said, *"Three weeks ago I was addicted to sweets."*

When we ask our children to do things we never do ourselves, it is a form of scandal. I think of it as "subtle scandal." Clearly, we don't believe in what we are asking our children to believe in. I told this story at the Parent's Club meeting this past week, but it applies to any Catholic parent who just drops their kids off for Grapevine, EDGE or LIFE TEEN who don't come to church themselves. It applies to Catholic parents whose children are making First Communion, and especially First Reconciliation.

Many have no intention of ever going to confession themselves. It is “subtle scandal” at work. The reason scandal is so bad is because it cuts at the root of faith. It says that following Jesus is not as important, let’s say, as following the Seahawks, the Sunday paper, or a golf ball. But children are not the only ones scandalized. It can effect us all. It makes living our faith that much harder for everyone. Faith is a journey we are called to walk together.

When I was a little boy, my father asked me if I ever said the Rosary. “*Not very often,*” I replied. And he said, “*No one will say it for you.*” No one will go to Mass for us either. Faith is a responsibility we have to God and to each other. When you chronically come late, leave early, or miss Mass all together, it effects us all. It is a subtle form of scandal.

May this Eucharist we now offer continue the transformation of our hearts. (By the way, millstones are very heavy.)