Mrs. Williams sat down at the kitchen table with her cup of coffee. It had been a hectic Saturday morning. But now things had settled down at last. The kids were out playing with friends and the baby was playing quietly in the playpen in the living room.

Josh came in the back door looking bored and wandered into the living room. For a few moments all was quiet ... then a scream shattered the calm. It wasn't cry of pain, but howl of indignation.

Mrs. Williams let out a long sigh, set down her cup, and went into the living room to see what was the matter.

There was Josh, trying to hide the baby's teddy bear behind his back and glaring back at her with all the defiance a four-year-old could muster.

"Josh," she said, "why did you take your sister's teddy bear?"

"I didn't," said Josh.

"Honey, it's right there in your hand."

"I didn't take it," he said.

Then, after a brief and uncomfortable silence, he blurted out "my hand took it."

"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off."

That sounds rather silly, don't you think?

It seems like a rather childish notion of sin.

Jesus knew, of course, that it's not our hands -- or feet or eyes -- that cause us to sin ... and I think that deep down little Josh knew it too.
Just four weeks ago we read about Jesus’ reply to the Pharisees who confronted him when they observed the disciples’ disregard for ritual purity:

“Nothing that enters one from outside can defile a person,” said Jesus; “but the things that come out from within are what defile. From within their hearts come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, … greed.”

From our hearts, from that place where we keep our thoughts and desires … that is where sin originates.

---

This saying – “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off” – is based on a popular metaphor of that day. In the ancient cultures of the eastern Mediterranean civil groups were often compared to the body. Indeed, Paul made great use of this metaphor when he described the early church as the body of Christ in his first letter to the Corinthians.

Today’s Gospel reading has two parts. The first recounts an incident and the subsequent discussion about it between John and Jesus. The second part, the ‘saying’, expands the point that Jesus was making to John. Together these two parts form a single teaching.

John had adopted a kind of chauvinism for their early community. Its members were superior to outsiders and they reserved to themselves certain rights and privileges.

Jesus is correcting this view: don’t judge the person by his affiliation with us, but judge him by his actions – by what he does and says. Understand, he warns John, that an outsider may be good a prophet and a disciple may be a great sinner.

You may find, he argues, that for the good of others, you have to deal more harshly with the disciple than anyone on the outside.

“If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off” was a metaphor for excommunication rather than an exaggerated demand for personal piety.
But how helpful is this interpretation? I think for us, the notion of excluding someone, of excommunicating him, is almost as challenging as cutting off one’s hand.

—–

It helps if we consider excommunication not in the strict sense of cannon law, which is rarely used, but in the more common sense of breaking fellowship with someone.

Imagine the young man whose best friend is lead astray by someone he met at college. He watches helplessly as his friend descends into a dark world of drugs and then petty crime. He can’t condone his friend’s self-destruction nor pretend that everything is okay.

Or imagine that the group you have hung out with for years at work has begun to change; becoming more of clique beset with gossip, petty intrigue and unwelcoming and unkind to those who don’t fit in. And to your dismay, you realize that you are also becoming more critical, gossipy and snobbish.

Or imagine once again that someone close to you has adopted a very immoral lifestyle and is by example making it easier for others to do the same. It happened to the Church in Corinth. A young man of the community was sleeping with his step-mother and Paul was dismayed when the Corinthians failed to respond to the situation. It was one more symptom of an increasingly dysfunctional church.

In each of these situations personal relationships had changed. Fellowship has been broken. An excommunication had occurred, or was required.

Jesus is warning us that we can not follow others without discernment, especially when doing so leads not to life, but to darkness and death.

But excommunication does not mean that we turn our backs on our friends out of fear and an instinct for self-preservation. Excommunication is not abandonment; it is supposed to be remedy.
When we have to break fellowship with someone we don’t exclude him completely from our lives. But our relationship with him has been damaged and has changed. While we may no longer be friends, we still care for him. Love is not simply friendship. Love also holds out the possibility and the hope of reconciliation.

If you have broken fellowship with someone, if there has been an excommunication with a friend or a family member, you must keep alive the possibility of reconciliation.

Reconciliation, as our faith teaches us, requires four things: confession, contrition, forgiveness and penance. But sometimes they don’t happen in that order. Sometimes reconciliation can begin with forgiveness, which makes room for the other steps.

We live in a world filled with sin. And our obligation as Christians is to struggle against it. Jesus reminds us that we can’t simply ignore it. We have to acknowledge it and we have to confront it. But we must always keep in mind that the sin and the sinner are not one in the same.

Sometimes that sounds so hard. We don’t like confrontation and we don’t like to forgive. Sometimes it might just seem easier to cut off your hand. Please don’t! It won’t help anyone. It certainly won't bring them back to Christ.