

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cycle B, 9.2.18

Deuteronomy 4:1-2,6-8/James 1:17-27/

Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

LEARNING FROM THE LAW/ LIVING FROM THE HEART

Two monks, an elder and a younger monk, were walking down a muddy road on a rainy day. They came upon a lovely young girl dressed in fine silk, who was afraid to cross because of all the mud and the water. "Come on, girl," said the elder monk. And he picked her up in his strong arms, and carried her across. Then the two monks walked in silence till they reached the monastery. The younger monk couldn't bear it any longer. *"Monks shouldn't go near young girls,"* he blurted out, *"certainly not beautiful ones like that one! Why did you do it?"* *"Dear brother,"* said the elder monk, *"I put the girl down by the river bank, but I see you have carried her right into the monastery."*



In these two monks we see the two often conflicting approaches to Christian spirituality, namely, avoidance and involvement. The spirituality of avoidance emphasizes the devout fulfilment of pious religious obligations, and shuns away from those regarded as sinners for fear of being contaminated by them. It aims at keeping the believer unstained by the world, not at changing the world or making a difference. The spirituality of involvement, on the other hand, emphasizes active solidarity with sinners, who are often perceived as the

untouchables. It doesn't shun but extends a helping hand to them, believing that it's better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. Balance in Christian spirituality consists in reconciling these two tendencies and bringing them into harmony. As James tells us, **"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress [involvement], and to keep oneself unstained by the world [avoidance]"**.

In today's gospel the Pharisees and the scribes speak for the spirituality of avoidance. Their focus is on ritual observances. The Pharisees and experts in the law had come from Jerusalem to spy on Jesus. These out-of-town intruders from the big city tried to impose upon the little people of the countryside in Galilee sanitary rules and dietary regulations which those poor folk could never have followed. Clinging to ancient customs of their ancestors, which went well beyond the essence of the Torah, these legalists were more intent on ritual purity than on purifying their hearts and opening them to God. Jesus' words to them in today's gospel, when they were first spoken, were probably the most revolutionary passages in the New Testament. He dismissed as irrelevant their elaborate hand washings. He pointed out to them how a rigid adherence to their traditional laws could actually mean disobedience to God's law. And more startling yet, Jesus declared that nothing that goes into a person can possibly defile.

In effect, Jesus was saying that **things** cannot be either unclean or clean in any real religious sense of the term. Only people can really be defiled, and what defiles us are our actions -- which are the product of our own heart. If you want to be close to God, attend to matters of the

heart, not to dirt under your finger nails, as important as clean hands are. Nothing that prevents us from helping a person in need can ever be a rule approved by God. Their complaint about eating with unwashed hands has nothing to do with personal hygiene. They're interested in the ritual washing of hands, which was an institution meant to avoid the presumed impurity of Gentiles from contaminating the ritual purity of Hebrews.



By not observing the ceremony the disciples of Jesus are blurring the distinction between Jews and Gentiles and behaving as if the two were one. Jesus defends this spirituality of inclusion with outsiders in very unmistakable terms: **“Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile”**.

In this one single sentence Jesus demolishes the entire structure of religious homophobia, the fear and avoidance of people who are different from us. Gentiles don't defile Jews any more than Jews defile Gentiles. A clean-minded person sees nothing but cleanness everywhere, in everything and in everyone. We might indeed expand a famous beatitude of Jesus like this: **“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God everywhere, in everything and in everyone.”** No wonder

Jesus didn't hesitate to touch a leper, to eat with sinners and to let an “unclean” woman touch him. He got so involved with bad people that they nicknamed him **“a friend of tax collectors and sinners”**.

Today's scriptures offer us a good opportunity to take a second look at our spiritual orientation. Do we cultivate a spirituality of avoidance like the younger monk who would leave a small girl out in the cold for the sake of keeping some man-made rule or for fear of compromising his holiness? If so, today's gospel challenges us to be more like the elder monk who would reach out to all those in need, knowing that unless we carry the defilement in our hearts already, nothing and nobody outside of us can defile us.

Is there any question in our minds that our Church needed a revision of Catholic morality which came with the renewal of the Second Vatican Council? Hadn't we inverted the divine order and made the insignificant things loom too large, and the truly important moral struggles left to so-called experts and formulas of moral conduct that we could memorize from books? When we went to the sacrament of Reconciliation (or confession, as we called it at the time), our focus wasn't on the social dimension of life that St. James commends in today's epistle -- the sins that break down the fabric of society (*“Do I care for the widow and the orphan?”*). We were taught to emphasize the personal and private (*“Did I lose my patience? Did I have an impure thought?”*) Our examination of conscience was one-sided; Jesus invites his followers to make it two-sided and expand our field of awareness. I've never had someone come to Reconciliation and say: *“Bless me , Father, for I have sinned. I failed to shed*

tears last night because there are children in the world who went to bed hungry."

The moral revolution that has taken place over the past generation has had some negative effects. For many people it hasn't happened fast enough, so they've dismissed the wisdom of the church as a valid source of moral guidance. For others, things moved too fast; they lost their sense of direction, feeling adrift and without the firm guidance they once depended upon. Still others have become morally indifferent. But for most of us, there is a deeper appreciation of Catholic morality that helps us to live our faith more realistically and with greater authenticity.



That help has come in three ways. First, I think we trust more readily our **common sense**. It's 'common' because we share it with all people -- moral goodness isn't something God has restricted only to a few, or only to church-goers; and it's 'sense' because we can experience it through our senses, each day in the world around us. Second, we allow our words and actions to be guided by the standards of **human decency**. The example of Jesus is that of a person who reached out to people in need. He didn't ask about someone's political persuasion or sexual orientation, about their family background or marital status. He gave us a practical morality for daily living: Respond to the human need before you! Finally, we've learned the **higher obligation** of being merciful and kind in all

our dealings. Where law gives life and protects rights it must be enforced and observed. But it must never suffocate the Spirit which leads us above and beyond anything the law might ever ask.

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