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[Scripture for Life](#)

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The Pharisees and scribes who gathered around Jesus in today's Gospel reading were like fastidious amateurs who watch figure skating solely to note each flaw or ungainly gesture. In today's Gospel, these experts in righteousness focused on the disciples' disgraceful deficiency in handwashing practice. Of course, a critique of the disciple was an implicit disparagement of the teacher.

Jesus knew nothing about germ theory. Perceptive as he was, we can rest assured that he never saw a microorganism. When he lambasted the delegation from Jerusalem, Jesus remained focused on faith and integrity, not hygiene.

As so often happens, especially in matters of religion, the Pharisees' problem sprang from good practices that went awry and took on a life of their own. According to Jewish tradition, God gave Moses the law as a guide to help humans fulfill their vocation as collaborators in the work of ongoing creation.

As we hear in today's first reading, the law pointed out the path to life and outlined the plan for establishing a holy nation. Observance of God's law would form the desert wanderers into a community that demonstrated the goodness of the God who called them into being. The law was essentially a blueprint through which the people of God would know how to further God's plan for all people. By collaborating with that plan, they would enjoy communion with God.

That was the plan.

But, that plan fell under the influence of competitive, scrupulous, self-righteous, legalistic human beings. In other words, it got interpreted by the likes of you and me. With the best intentions in the world, wise people developed customs and practices designed to safeguard the law by interpreting how it should be put into practice in everyday situations. From the command to keep holy the Lord's Day, there grew precise instructions about just which activities were and were not permissible on the day of rest, right down to the detail of when a candle could be lit. Exodus 30 and 40 taught that priests should perform ritual ablutions. (Exodus 30:18-21; 40:31-32.) Based on that, teachers developed practices to guarantee ritual purity for everyone — requirements that not everyone could fulfill due to their work circumstances, their health or their gender. The law which was designed to be a path of holiness for all people became distorted. People who wielded the power of interpretation developed precepts that effectively segregated the community. Those who had the wealth and free time to act holy could cite religious reasons for avoiding the unclean and sinners whose touch or presence could contaminate them and their sanctuaries.

Jesus understood the law as a divine plan to bring humanity into union with God and with one another. Few situations moved him to anger like the hypocrisy of people who distorted the law's intent. Obviously, the problem was not unique to first-century Pharisees. Every human society and every religious tradition is prone to promote self-serving elitism and exclusion of those labeled as "the others." In-group cohesion and self-ascribed status are the rewards for such discrimination.

Jesus responded to the purity police by citing the prophetic tradition. His quote from Isaiah was an indictment of their motives for scrupulous scrubbing. He might as well have said: “Is washing a humbling sign of your need to be cleansed from sin or a purity show? If you think clean fingernails are all you need to walk worthily in the presence of God, your hearts and your heads are in the wrong place!” In our liturgy, handwashing accompanies a prayer to be cleansed from sin.

This leads us to consider our own pious practices. How sincerely do we pray the Confiteor during our penitential act? Do we honestly admit our willful wrongdoing and avoidance of doing good? What if we took our penitential act as seriously as people in recovery take 12-Step meetings? At the beginning of each meeting, the participants introduce themselves as addicts. They go on to talk to one another about their failures and their attempts to avoid remaining trapped in destructive behavior. How would our faith communities change if we looked one another in the eye while saying, “I am a sinner. I need your support and your prayers!”?

Jesus critiqued his critics for keeping their hearts far from God. They lacked the integrity to admit their weakness, thereby blocking God’s saving grace from touching their hearts. A heart that protects itself from admitting weakness cannot know God because it has deified itself. We cannot mend our hearts solely by our own efforts. Fixing our hearts is a matter of will and grace. The grace is available through the law and the prophets, the Son and the communities led by his Spirit. Do we have faith that makes us willing to accept our need for help?

DEUTERONOMY 4:1-2, 6-8

As this scene opens, Moses has just finished a long speech summarizing how God led the people of Israel to the brink of their entry into the Holy Land. Now, knowing that he cannot accompany them in the final steps of their journey, Moses reminds them that obedience to God’s law is what makes them who they are.

Moses begins this section of his discourse with a formal command that the people listen to what he is about to proclaim. That command was no toss-off phrase or warm-up to what he was about to say. Moses wanted his people to listen to his words as if their lives depended on it — because he believed that they did. Moses regarded the law of God as the very source of life and identity for his people. He wanted them to listen with their whole heart and soul.

Moses’ command that the people listen deeply reminds us of the call of Samuel. When Samuel said, “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:9), he put himself in God’s hands. Listening meant that he was ready to do whatever God asked. People who listen in that way allow God’s word to permeate their being such that it becomes the central motivation of everything they do. Listening like this engenders obedience rooted in the heart. (The word obedience comes from the Latin root *audire*, to hear.)

Moses asks, “What nation is there that has gods so close ... as the Lord, our God, is to us?” That question explains the heart of his concept of God’s law. For Moses, God’s law expresses God’s will in a way that’s almost incarnational. (See *Deuteronomy* by Patrick Miller.) The law is God’s way of drawing close to the people, God’s way of sharing divine creativity and purpose with the chosen people. Because of that, following the law was actually a form of communion. Thus, Moses explains that if his people obey the law, their way of life will make them a sign to the nations, a witness to who God is.

Moses admonished his people to neither add nor subtract from the law. That can be confusing because law needs to be interpreted to apply it to particular circumstances. We could understand Moses’ injunction about changing nothing as a reminder that, although it is necessary, interpretation is always limited by its particular circumstances. Therefore, scribes, Pharisees, guardians of the tradition, theologians and hierarchs must keep their limitations in mind. Interpretation cannot supplant the law.

Understood this way, this reading complements today’s Gospel. When Jesus defends his disciples who seem to be infringing their religious tradition by their eating practices, he is pointing out the difference between God’s law and human interpretations. Just as he did in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:17), Jesus was harking back to the underlying meaning of Moses’ message. The law calls for obedience that springs from the heart rather than mechanical conformity to a code of conduct.

PSALMS 15:2-3, 3-4, 4-5

Psalm 15 was written as a liturgical psalm, an entrance hymn to be sung by people coming into the temple. The first verse asks, “Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy mountain?” The rest of the psalm responds to the question. As this psalm is framed for today’s liturgy, the antiphon picks up on the heart of Moses’ message, promising that “Those who do justice will live in the presence of the Lord.”

In her book *Sing a New Song: The Psalms in the Sunday Lectionary*, Benedictine Sr. Irene Nowell explains that the Hebrew word *sedeq*, translated as justice, refers to the quality of relationships that a person maintains with others and God. Righteousness thus has far less to do with regulations than with interactions.

As the verses continue, the psalmist follows Moses’ lead and indicates that justice or righteousness is primarily a matter of a heart that cherishes the truth so much that truth guides everything the person says or does. It would be easy to believe that this psalm was in the back of Jesus’ mind as he replied to the pharisaic paragons of propriety who criticized his disciples for failing to wash their hands. This psalm explains justice in detail, including its demand to not harm or even reproach another, to lend freely and rebuff bribes. It says nothing about meticulous rules.

Remembering that the psalm originated as part of an entrance liturgy, we might use it as a guideline during the introductory rites of our liturgy. As the psalm reminds us that justice is a matter of putting a heart for others into action, the rest of the psalm could be used as a guideline for an examination of conscience or a penitential act.

The last line promises that those who act with justice will never be shaken. That is a common sentiment in the psalms and one that could also lead us to a new reflection on our traditional sign of peace. On this Sunday when the Liturgy of the Word points so clearly to integrity of heart as the essence of our relationship with God and others, we might consider using the sign of peace to bless one another with a mandate to act with justice or with a prayer that each of us become more conscious of walking in the presence of the Lord.

JAMES 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27

We could interpret the opening line of this selection from the Letter of James as a continuance of Moses’ teaching as well as an affirmation of the idea that human beings can discover God in the goodness of creation. Either way, the passage affirms that we find a reflection of God in everything that is good, be it in the nature and people around us or the work of grace within us.

Moses called on his people to listen with their hearts. James tells us to welcome the word planted in us with meekness or humility. The idea that the word is planted in us emphasizes that it is a grace, a gift of God and that, like a seed, it lives within us, involved in a process of growth moving toward fruition.

The word our Lectionary translates as “humbly” (*praitoes*) is a somewhat uncommon word in Scripture, found in Matthew (5:4; 11:29; 21:5) and in some of the letters. According to William Barclay in *The Letters of James and Peter*, a better translation would be “meekly.” One who is meek in this scriptural sense is someone who is ready to learn, who does not consider her or himself self-sufficient. When we combine that idea with the call to “welcome” the word, we get a picture of James’ ideal disciples as people who look forward to the ongoing movements of grace in themselves. Unashamed of being on the way, they thrive on the hope of ongoing growth.

With verse 22, “be doers ... not hearers only,” we come to one of James’ most famous themes: the necessity of putting faith into action as the only way to live with integrity. There can hardly be a stronger warning than to say that not putting God’s word into action is delusional behavior. Someone who simply lies to others, who pretends to be who she knows she is not, is aware of the deceit and at least understands that she is a liar. But people who delude themselves have fallen into a world of illusion. Like addicts in denial, they have slipped into a state of blindness from which it is extremely difficult to escape, and nigh unto impossible to overcome by oneself. When someone has slipped into being a hearer but not a doer, the prophetic community has the responsibility to speak like James and call them back to integrity. So too, prophetic members of the community have the responsibility to call the church as a whole to the care for the poor that demonstrates what James calls true religion.

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

After our long sojourn through John 6, we return to the Gospel of Mark at what is nearly its crucial midpoint. Mark

presents this interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees without specifying its precise time or place, thereby placing it in a category of widely applicable controversy and teaching. While Mark frames the incident as a conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees and scribes, what is really at stake is the question of the heart of religion in contrast to customs or traditions that may or may not function to bring people closer to God.

When the Pharisees speak of compulsory hand washings they are referring to the traditions that grew up around the Mosaic law. While not the law itself, these practices were intended to work like a “fence around the Torah;” they were behaviors which would facilitate full obedience to the law. In every society, from churches to families, once-beneficial practices easily become rigid customs that usurp the authority of law. Jesus disapproved of the Pharisees not for their hygienic practices, but because they had allowed their ritual behaviors, the fence around the Torah, to supersede the underlying intent of the law itself.

The value of ritual purity originated in respect for the Temple, but in some cases, it had become degraded into a practical elitism that marginalized others. Women and men came to be labeled as sinners or unclean on account of their professions or even conditions of gender. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for sanctifying legalisms that their lifestyle allowed them to maintain while they denigrated the people of God who could not afford the same privilege. In a statement that Paul would elaborate on in 1 Corinthians 11:17, Jesus quoted Isaiah and declared that the worship of those scribes and Pharisees was worthless because they had made doctrines of their preferences while ignoring the intent of God’s commandments.

This week’s readings call us to ever-deeper and broader integrity. Do we admit our own need for conversion and help to grow in grace? The readings warn us that our critiques of others put our own values and integrity on show and reveal whether our priorities come from a God-touched heart or a desire to look pious. When we discuss what “should” be done, our remembrance of Moses and Jesus demands that we question whether our interpretation of God’s will is life-giving to all people or self-serving.

James gives us the final test: Religion that is pure is this — care for the most needy and freedom from the false values of society.

Planning: 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

This week we return to the Gospel according to Mark. Today’s readings raise the issue of obedience to God’s commandments. The first reading strongly urges the Israelites to “observe them carefully, for thus will you give evidence of your wisdom and intelligence to the nations.” The Gospel, however, nuances that advice as Jesus distinguishes what is more basic from what is less important. Those “less important” laws were considered God-given, but Jesus recognizes that some laws override other lesser rules.

That’s a principle that planners need to remember when some rules contradict others (e.g., what can be in the bread when it should look like real bread). Even more important is to remember that the ultimate commandment is the two-fold command of love that Jesus taught.

Love is expressed in many ways. One that people may not think of quickly is giving of our resources in the collection. James says, “All good giving and every perfect gift is from above” and also speaks of us being “a kind of firstfruits” of God’s creatures. I wonder how many of your parishioners see what they give in the collection as an act of love. How many recognize that their giving is “from above” and that it is a kind of “firstfruits” offering? Israel offered the first fruits of the harvest as a sacrifice, which indicated their recognition that the whole harvest belonged to God and was to be used according to God’s will. Do your parishioners recognize that all they have belongs to God when they put a share of it in the collection?

Obviously, there is much richness here that is often overlooked. How can you help your parishioners appreciate more fully the meaning and spiritual significance of their giving? This might even increase the giving somewhat, but that is not the main goal. What is important is that the collection becomes truly a part of the worship, not just a functional need that

interrupts the action of the liturgy.

If parishioners' giving in the collection reminds them that everything they have belongs to God, that should also lead them to a fuller response to God throughout the week. James also calls us to be "doers of the word and not hearers only." He goes on to insist, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world." What a powerful statement and challenge to all of us that is!

Can these themes find a place in the homily this weekend and/or in the bulletin or the petitions? As Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians, Chapter 13, if we do not give out of love, then our giving is empty.

Prayers: 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Sue Robb

INTRODUCTION

We are challenged to balance God's laws with our love of others. Sometimes, like the Pharisees, we place rules and conditions on how we share our love and who is worthy of receiving the gifts and love we have to offer. Jesus is both faithful to the law of Moses and to the immediate needs of the people before him. He is the perfect example of a hearer — and doer — of God's word. Today we are called to be — and do — the same.

PENITENTIAL ACT

- Lord Jesus, you responded to those in need with unconditional love and mercy: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you call us to be your voice in today's world: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you are the way, the truth and the light for all ages: Lord, have mercy.

PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

Presider As we strive to be both hearers and doers of God's word, we lift up our prayers trusting that God, who both listens and acts, will hear and answer them.

Minister We pray for the universal church and her leaders: May they always be mindful of the needs of the least of its members and work tirelessly for justice and peace in our world ... we pray,

- For those in positions of political leadership: May they create laws that protect the dignity of the orphans, widows, the unborn, the aged and all without a voice ... we pray,
- For those who do not believe in God's word or ways: May their hearts and minds be opened to God's loving, active presence in their lives ... we pray,
- For all who labor and are in need of rest: May their minds, bodies and spirits be strengthened to continue Christ's work ... we pray,
- For unity among all peoples: May we work to end divisions in our world, in our communities, our homes and in our own hearts ... we pray,
- For all who are sick in mind, body and spirit and for their caregivers; for the dying, especially those who will die alone today. May the peace of heaven be theirs forever ... we pray,

Presider Loving God, we place these prayers before you with humble hearts. If they be in accord with your will, answer them and give us the insight and courage to be an answer to someone else's prayer this week. This we ask, through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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