Spirituality
Pencil Preaching



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“You disregard God’s commandment but cling to human tradition” (Mark 7:7).

Gen 1:20—2:4a; *Mk 7:1-13*

In today’s gospel passage from Mark, Jesus challenges his religious opponents for insisting on ritual hand washing and the purification of cups and dishes while

neglecting the deeper command to be pure of heart. He also criticizes officials for excusing themselves from the commandment to honor and support their parents by claiming that their resources were dedicated to God.

Jesus' deepest criticism was that his opponents were neglecting the first commandment of love in favor of their own expanding body of man-made rules. Jesus was not alone in his emphasis on the commandment of love. This debate within the religious community was best answered by the revered Rabbi Hillel, who, it is claimed, when challenged to recite the Law while standing on one leg, simply said, "That which is hateful to you, do not do unto your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary; now go and learn."

If we sort out essential commandments from church rules, we encounter a long history of reformers arguing for essentials against traditionalists, who insisted on institutional rules and their own theological systems above all else.

The debate over the church's all-male, celibate clergy is one of these issues. Though a chronic shortage of priests has meant that believers often do not receive the Eucharist or other sacraments, alternative solutions are rejected. These include the ordination of women based on Jesus' own inclusion of women among his disciples and Paul's witness to female leadership in ministry and house churches, and the basic principle of equality for women.

The current criticism by some in the hierarchy of Pope Francis' statement on decriminalizing homosexuality or his emphasis on pastoral accompaniment in the case of Catholics in second marriages seems more about enforcing legal standards than acknowledging real suffering with compassion. The pope has angered some critics by simply suggesting that ordinary Catholics are capable of discernment and examining their own situations conscientiously. Priests should be part of that process but without needing to control it.

All of us are asked to determine what is essential and most important in our lives. Do we insist on our human rules and traditions at the expense of being patient and loving with others in their struggles? Are we living in fear of God's judgment instead of opening our hearts to God's mercy? Jesus came to liberate us from both fear and legalistic thinking. If we do our best and concentrate on love, are we not fulfilling the whole law?

Editor's note ----------

In the weeks ahead, leading to Lent and Holy Week, many of the scripture readings will reflect the political and religious divisions and uncertainty that roiled Judaism and the earliest decades of Christianity. Our reflections will take into consideration that the texts contain language that historically served to foster ugly stereotypes and fuel ancient hostility toward Jews. The Catholic Church took a huge step toward correcting those perceptions in the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate.* More than 50 years after the promulgation of that document, the church is still wrestling with how to interpret our sacred texts in light of new research and understanding. A good point of reference is a 2019 talk by Pope Francis to the Pontifical Biblical Institute as it addressed the topic, “Jesus and the Pharisees: An Interdisciplinary Reappraisal.” He spoke of the need to “find ways to overcome ancient prejudices.”

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/may/documents/papa-francesco_20190509_pont-istitutobiblico.html