

Twenty-Second Sunday of Ordinary Time-B

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

Dear Friends.

As is often the case, Jesus uses the hostile complaint of the Pharisees and Scribes to summon us into a deeper dimension his message. In today's Gospel, Jesus takes on the purity laws. Over time, these good practices had lost their way. They eventually became a source of division and elitism, hypocrisy and isolation. It had become almost a full time job to respond to the endless details of the purity laws. The working poor found this an impossible burden. As an example, the shepherds were considered totally out of the realm of respectability because of their failure to ritualize the overwhelming demands of the purity laws.

In the beginning, the purity laws were a guide to true integrity. They were a means to express the true holiness of the Chosen People in the midst of their pagan neighbors. However, their perversion over time had evolved into an expression of power and control as well as a source of income for the élite.

Jesus cut right to center of the issue in the quote for Isaiah.

***This people honors me with their lips,***

***But their hearts are far from me;***

***In vain do they worship me***

***teaching as doctrines human precepts.***

The fundamental issue is the heart when it comes to one's relationship to God.

This core presence within the person nurtures all true and authentic morality.

Any use of the law that is not rooted in the true faithfulness of the heart soon becomes a caricature, reducing commitment to lip service and empty reverence. Hypocrisy is never far behind.

Jesus' constant message is about faithfulness that is the product of a pure heart. For the heart to attain this sense of holiness and purity it needs the word of God. This holy presence will guide and inspire in all circumstances. Likewise, it involves a growing awareness of the potential for evil within each person. This self-knowledge is a critical component of the gospel experience. Listing twelve common expressions of evil, Jesus then says: "***All these evils come from within and they defile.***" (Mk 7:23)

Jesus is constantly inviting the crowds and the disciples and us to move beyond the letter of the law to the deeper domain of the spirit, the home arena of the heart. This is a call to see in Jesus the one who truly is the absolute revelation of the God of love and mercy. He is the fullness of truth and freedom. In our effort to walk with Jesus, which is the true Christian life, we will find the true law which is the fount of all true morality. This is the gift of Jesus' new law, love of God and love of our neighbor.

Till the end, the Church will have to deal with awesome pull of hypocrisy and the temptation to weaponize the laws for the control and privilege of the few. Till the end, all of us as individuals, will struggle with a fragmented heart that distorts Jesus' teachings for our personal advantage. Till the end, we will need to pray to Jesus for mercy and the elusive gift of purity of heart. This will help us hear and respond to the cry of the poor in our daily life.