

August 29, 2021
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Deut 4:1-2, 6-8
James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

I have a number of close Jewish friends, so I always get uncomfortable when Jesus starts calling people hypocrites in the gospel. Really? Our Jesus? How can I explain this language to my Jewish friends? I suspect that because of my Jewish friends, I perhaps hear today's gospel a bit differently than the average Catholic.

Does today's gospel really tell us that the Jewish people are hypocrites? Or is Jesus saying that all religious rules are out and all one has to do is feel the love? That sounds like the 1960's and 70's all over again.

Maybe we need to examine today's gospel in the context of its day.

Let's talk first about the Pharisees. Are they really just a small-minded group of rigid legalists and the unwavering foes of Jesus as the gospel seems to portray them? It's actually much more complex than that.

Pharisaism was one of many Jewish religious movements at the time of Jesus. A religion with a number of different ideas and movements shouldn't surprise us. Look at Christianity today: Catholic, Methodist, Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican, Presbyterian, Evangelical, Baptist, and on and on and on. There are even sects within sects.

Pharisaism was a kind of religious revival movement. It arose out of a praiseworthy desire to observe the commandments of the Torah more faithfully. The Pharisees believed some things that other Jewish groups

did not. For example, the Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead while the Sadducees did not. In that respect, the Pharisees might have had a better understanding of some of the things Jesus was teaching than the average Jew.

The Pharisees believed that, in addition to the written Torah given to Moses, there was also an oral teaching, a tradition passed on of how to understand and apply the Torah in everyday situations. Beliefs and practices were handed on by word of mouth from generation to generation. This actually made the Pharisees more adaptable to new situations and changing times than other groups who did not accept this oral tradition.

To use a Catholic term, the Pharisees were lay people. They were not priests, although a few may have been rabbinical teachers. Only the priests could offer sacrifice in the Temple.

The Pharisees actually had a noble mission. They wanted to take the holiness of Temple worship, performed only in Jerusalem, and bring it into the daily life of all the Jewish people throughout the nation—even the world. They wanted people to be able to live out

Temple holiness in their homes. The Pharisees taught that holiness exists outside the Temple; that one could live in holiness before God anywhere in the world.

The Pharisees wanted to observe the Torah with great faithfulness and precision, so they developed their own particular religious practices that emphasized protecting the holy from the profane. We see that in today's gospel in things like washing hands and purifying vessels.

To call the Pharisees religious leaders would be inaccurate. Some Pharisees might have been influential business or community leaders, but the Pharisees had no formal authority over the people. That

authority was held by the High Priest and the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, under the vigilantly watchful eye of Rome. Nevertheless, the Pharisees held influence with those who ascribed to their beliefs.

Regarding things like food and cleanliness and purity, there were rules that applied to the general population and special rules that applied only to the priests. The Pharisees voluntarily applied the priestly purity rules to themselves in their efforts to live the holy life to which they aspired. What the Pharisees did as lay people would be akin to Catholic laity making vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity; or promising to pray the office each day like Catholic clergy; or attending daily Mass. The Pharisees were not bad people—far from it.

But isn't it strange that sometimes when our goal is to become more holy by taking on added religious observances or promises, we can sometimes miss the forest for the trees? Voluntary practices or devotions intended to lead us closer to God can become ends unto themselves. Sometimes we can get so wrapped up in religious ritual that we neglect the very wise teaching of St James in today's second reading: "Be doers of the Word and not hearers only.... Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: To care for the orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world." When St James wrote this, "orphans and widows" was a term commonly accepted to mean anyone who is defenseless or oppressed. Today we might call it social justice.

In today's gospel Jesus is not saying "get rid of God's commandments in the Torah" or "rules are out; love is in". What He is saying is this. The heart of the Torah is love of God and love of neighbor and a life of justice and mercy. If our religious practices and observances don't lead us to that, then those practices are hypocritical and empty. If we find ourselves in that situation, we need a change of heart.

Regarding the question of impurity by not washing hands, Jesus teaches that impurity, i.e. spiritual uncleanness, doesn't come from the outside, from contact with something unclean outside of us. It comes from within. It comes from our hearts. Spiritual uncleanness is exemplified by things like gossip, envy, pride, contempt, hate, or being judgmental. These things aren't on the outside. They germinate from within and make us spiritually impure.

So in the gospel, Jesus is saying that washing hands doesn't make a person clean before God. A clean heart makes a person clean before God. Jesus is telling us to clean up our hearts, then wash our hands if we want.

So before we condemn the Pharisees as hypocrites, maybe we need to look at ourselves, because no one has a monopoly on hypocrisy.

- Do our religious practices bring our faith life alive such that we put it into practice in the world like St James exhorts us to do? Or do we engage in religious practices out of comfort or to be seen or to have a social life? Or do we engage in religious practices merely out of rote habit?

- Do we judge how others practice their religion like the Pharisees were judging Jesus' disciples in today's gospel?

- Do our religious practices come from our hearts or our heads?

I think overall the Pharisees, like us, were probably pretty good eggs. They were well-intentioned people of faith. So the point of today's gospel is this. We can always be better. We can always improve our faith lives. We can always love more and judge less. We can always live more from the heart and less from the head.

We're on a journey, and if we're faithful to God and to ourselves, we're on a journey of continuous improvement. As we continue our celebration today, let us ask the Lord to always walk with us on our

journey. May He keep our hearts pure, our spirits strong, our faith alive, and our focus on others rather than ourselves. May He work with us to become more faithful and to continuously become better followers of His teachings.