

August 29, 2021
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Now when the Pharisees with some scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they observed that some of his disciples ate their meals with unclean, that is, unwashed, hands. (For the Pharisees and, in fact, all Jews, do not eat without carefully washing their hands, keeping the tradition of the elders. And on coming from the marketplace they do not eat without purifying themselves. And there are many other things that they have traditionally observed, the purification of cups and jugs and kettles and beds.)

So the Pharisees and scribes questioned him, "Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?" He responded, "Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written: '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.' You disregard God's commandment but cling to human tradition."

He summoned the crowd again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand. Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defile." From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile."

Background:

For the past several weeks the gospel texts have been taken from the sixth chapter of John's gospel. With the 22nd week in ordinary time, the lectionary returns to the Gospel of Mark for its gospel texts. The last time Mark's gospel was used was the 16th Sunday in ordinary time, July 18th this year. In that gospel, the disciples had just returned from their first missionary journeys. Jesus had taken them away from the crowds by boat, but the people had discovered the place where they were coming ashore and were waiting for Jesus and the disciples. (Mark 5:30-34) Between that point and today's gospel, Mark records the feeding of the five thousand; Jesus (but not Peter) walking on water; and Jesus' arrival at Gennesaret where the people immediately recognized him and "scurried about the surrounding country and began to bring in the sick... and begged him that they might touch only the tassel on his cloak; and as many as touched it were healed." (Mark 6:56)

The first part of this week's gospel shifts the focus, from the crowd's response to Jesus to that conflict between the religious authorities of the day and Jesus. The Pharisees and the scribes are said to be "from Jerusalem." This would carry the same kind of symbolic weight as if today one might say they were "from the Vatican" or "from Washington." They represent an official level of authority that might intimidate an itinerant preacher like Jesus or a local rabbi.

The issue is the disciples have not observed a ritual of hand washing that the Pharisees promoted as part the 613 unwritten precepts that they believed all faithful Jews should observe. Their Great Tradition was a set of defined practices that were maintained by elites who lived in the cities. But even at the time of Jesus, there was an awareness that peasants and those who lived in the countryside or the itinerant could not observe The Great Tradition and developed "The Little Tradition" that was more suited to the realities of their life. Jesus, an itinerant laborer and preacher whose disciples included fishermen whose daily life brought them in contact with dead fish and blood, would have been unable to adhere to The Great Tradition of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees and scribes in this gospel are holding Jesus responsible for the behavior of his followers. They are indirectly questioning his reputation because he did not insist on the ritual purity that they believed every devout Jew should observe. This attempt to publicly shame or embarrass him was meant to weaken Jesus' status in the community and reestablish their own authority. Mark recounts in the verses prior to this text that, given Jesus' popularity with the people, the Pharisees have reason to be concerned about Jesus.

In response to their objections, Jesus insults them, quoting from scripture, and then he changes the topic. Jesus calls them hypocrites, which literally means “those whose faces are hidden behind masks.” He accuses them of quoting from the scriptures but not adhering to its teachings. Rather, they hide behind the purity laws to insult those who threaten their authority. They are like so many previous leaders who are more concerned with external public purity than hearts that are pure in their devotion to God. He quotes the ancient and respected prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 29:31) to support his position. Jesus then summons the crowd and teaches them as he draws on the image of being “unclean.” In doing so he has changed the topic from “the way to maintain ritual purity” to “what leads to impurity.” This is a much different question. He states that what makes a person unclean comes from within a person. Listing a series of recognized vices, Jesus says defilement begins from within the person and manifests itself in behavior. These are the things that make one unclean, not what one eats or whether or not they have washed their hands.

Reflection Questions:

1. What are some of the customs or practices in liturgy which you find meaningful?
2. Have you ever witnessed someone using a meaningful practice in the liturgy to shame or judge others?
3. Have you ever been excluded from participation because you did not meet someone’s expectations?
4. Can you think of Gospel texts where Jesus confronts those who would exclude others?
5. Do you know people for whom keeping all the “traditions of the church” is important, but they are difficult to live with or are personally unhappy?
6. When Jesus lists off the things that defile a person, how does that fit your own assessment of the things that are sources of your struggles?
7. Can you take some time now to talk with God about your desire to be a faithful disciple, a place where your religious practice might need to change, or some other concern that rose within you as you reflected on this gospel text?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fsc-calledtobe.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click on the icon will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

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Excerpts from the readings for August 29, 2021, the Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Moses said to the Israelites: "Hear the statutes and decrees which I am teaching you, that you may live, and take possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you. In your observance of the commandments of your God, you shall not add to what I command you nor subtract from it. Observe them carefully, for thus will you give evidence of your wisdom to the nations, who will hear of all these statutes and say, 'This great nation is truly a wise and intelligent people.'

For what nation is there that has gods so close to it as the Lord is to us whenever we call upon him?
Or what nation has statutes and decrees that are as just as this law which I am setting before you?"

*The one who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord. Whoever walks blamelessly and does justice; who thinks the truth in his heart and slanders not with his tongue.
Who harms not his fellow man, nor takes up a reproach against his neighbor;
by whom the reprobate is despised, while he honors those who fear the Lord.
Who lends not his money at usury and accepts no bribe against the innocent.
Whoever does these things shall never be disturbed.*

Brothers and sisters: All good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no alteration or shadow caused by change. He willed to give us birth by the word of truth that we may be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. Humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you and is able to save your souls. Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves. 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.

Some Pharisees and scribes observed that some of Jesus' disciples ate their meals with unwashed hands. — For the Pharisees and, in fact, all Jews, do not eat without carefully washing their hands, keeping the tradition of the elders. And on coming from the marketplace they do not eat without purifying themselves. And there are many other things that they have traditionally observed, the purification of cups and jugs and kettles and beds. — So the Pharisees and scribes questioned him, "Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?" He responded, "Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written: 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. You disregard God's commandment but cling to human tradition." He summoned the crowd again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand. Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defile. "From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile."

Excerpts from Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8; Psalm 15:2-5; James 1:17-22, 27; and Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Note from Joe:

Friends,

Here are the gospel background and reflection questions for August 29th, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. The gospel returns to Mark again, after the Bread of Life discourse series from John chapter six was concluded last Sunday. Some Pharisees ask Jesus why some of his disciples do not adhere to Jewish hand-washing traditions before eating. In response, Jesus quotes Isaiah and admonishes the Pharisees for paying more attention to the tradition than to what is in the heart. Then he teaches the crowd that a person is not defiled by what comes from outside. "The evils that come out from within--theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice...--they are what defile a person. The other readings also make reference to adhering to the law that came to God's people through Moses, and to remaining pure, abiding by the upright behavior that is pleasing to God. In the first reading from Deuteronomy, Moses tells the people of Israel, "Observe the commandments of the Lord carefully. For what great nation has statutes and decrees that are as just as this whole law?" Psalm 15 declares, "Whoever walks blamelessly and does justice shall live in the presence of the Lord; whoever thinks the truth in his heart and harms not his fellow man." In the second reading, from the letter of James, he writes "The Father willed to give us birth by the word of truth that is able to save your souls. Humbly welcome the word and be doers of the word, undefiled before God, caring for others in their affliction, keeping yourself unstained." t