

September 1, 2024
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 six weeks the Gospel texts were 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 the Sunday Gospel texts for reflection.

The last time Mark's Gospel was used was the 16th Sunday in ordinary time. 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). Mark then records the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus (but not Peter) walking on water, and Jesus' arrival at Gennesaret. There 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 the 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 symbolic weight as if one might say they were from Rome or Washington. They represent an official level of authority that might intimidate an itinerant preacher like Jesus or a local rabbi.

They would also bring up an important tradition within the Jewish community that they were God's chosen people--that God had chosen them from all the people to have a special unique relationship. In response the people were to protect that relationship by being observant of God's commands and expectations. While the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, laid down the foundation of that relationship, groups like the scribes and Pharisees desired to protect their sacred relationship with God by adding to the law a code of conduct that would act as a kind of parameter to guard that sacred relationship. Things like the washing of hands and pots were part of that tradition that people like the scribes and Pharisees advocated not for cleanliness but ritual purity and remind them of their sacred relationship with God.

The issue in this Gospel text is that the disciples have not observed a ritual of hand washing that the Pharisees promoted in unwritten precepts that they believed all faithful Jews should observe. But these practices were maintained by elite groups who mostly lived in the cities and were unaware that peasants and those who lived in the countryside could not observe them.

Jesus, an itinerant 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 expectations of those who saw themselves as being part of an elite nation of people chosen by God. Jesus' understanding that the common peasant from the highways and countryside was also being invited by God to be part of the reign of God presents a very different understanding of God's desire and invitation.

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. The Pharisees have reason to be concerned about Jesus' teaching and popularity.

In response to their objections, Jesus insults them, quotes from scripture, and then 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 the 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 the Church that you find personally meaningful?
2. Have you ever experienced someone (or yourself) using those practices to judge, discredit, or shame another?
3. Have you ever been excluded from participation because you did not meet another's expectations? How did that feel at the time? Did it affect your sense of your value?
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 valued, but they are difficult to live with or are unhappy persons?
6. When Jesus lists off the things that defile a person, how does that fit your own assessment of what is important in your own relationships with others and with God?
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 arose 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 September 1, 2024, 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 first fruits 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

Friends,

Here are the Gospel background and reflection questions for September 1st, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. In the Gospel from Mark, Jesus is challenged by Pharisees and scribes who observe that traditions of washing and purifying are not being observed by some of his disciples, suggesting that these omissions defile the disciples. Jesus responds first about their hypocrisy, quoting Isaiah, "This people honors

me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, teaching as doctrines human precepts.” He tells them, “You disregard God's commandment but cling to human tradition. He then teaches the crowd, “Nothing that enters from outside can defile that person; the things that come out from within--the evil thoughts from within their hearts--are what defile them.”

The other readings also have references to commandments and decrees, to not add or subtract from them; and how to rightly serve the Lord and not defile. In the first reading from Deuteronomy, Moses tells the people, “Observe the commandments of the Lord. Do not add to what I command you nor subtract from it. What great nation has statutes and decrees that are as just as this set before you today?” Psalm 15 proclaims, “The one who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord. Whoever does these things shall never be disturbed.” In the second reading, from the letter of James, he writes, “All good giving and every perfect gift is from above; there is no alteration caused by change. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

After six weeks of Gospels from the 6th chapter of John, we have now returned to the Gospel of Mark, the featured Gospel for year B in the liturgical cycle. When we last had a Gospel from Mark, in Mark's chapter 6, greater crowds were following him everywhere, “like sheep without a shepherd,” and he was aware of the need for them to be taught, and fed. We switched to John's chapter 6 for his version of the feeding of the 5000 and the subsequent Bread of Life discourse. Now we pick up again at the beginning of Mark's chapter 7. Like so many others, Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem gather around Jesus as well, with their own concerns and questions.

Joe

> i < May the Word light your way each day!