

Law and Life
Homily August 30, 2009
Kathy Bailey

Deuteronomy 4: 1 - 9

Psalm 15

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

Today's scripture parenthetically states "For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders"

Hum, where recently have I heard a lot about washing hands? Oh yes, Swine Flu.

Washing hands is a good thing, yes.

So what is the problem?

The problem is not the sanitation issue. The problem is the emphasis, the priorities.

How much easier it is to have a law or rule that you never brake and for which you can easily hold others responsible . What a wonderful feeling of safety and perhaps some superiority. No need for thought or discernment.

As many times as we may realize that "black and white" rules seldom work, we still strive for them. It's much easier. I've noticed this concept working with my students in math. When we are doing arithmetic and simple problems where an algorithm can be applied without much thought, most students do well.

Once you bring on real life problems where there is a wealth of numbers and questions that require thought, the students panic. Actually whether we recognize it or not we all panic. So we try to simplify and develop easy to follow rules. They didn't wash their hands is much easier to judge than getting to know them and understanding who they are and what they believe and why.

Many conflicts within and between our churches are the result of attempts to establish clear rules and laws that can be easily observed and avoid the difference of opinion and need to really understand.

Priorities, choices, it would be easier if all was clear. The first few years after I graduated from college, I developed a program for emotionally disturbed elementary students. All of my students were in regular classes and I worked with them according to their needs. Several were quite impulsive and were frequently in trouble for aggressive behavior. Scolding and punishing had been done for years with no positive effect.

As I wrestled with ways to guide these students I realized that there could be times where a socially unacceptable act is the only way to go and just may be worth the risk. An example may be when you are protecting yourself or someone else. Yet, when we make those choices we must be fully aware of the possible consequences and be willing to take the risk. So, I started talking to my students about "consequences". We frequently explored problem situations and discussed possible reactions. When we would talk about slugging the other person or some other violent reaction, I made it clear that it was a choice; however, before they followed through I expected them to consider the consequences and decide if the worst result was worth the action.

We even learned to play chess because there are times in chess that we sacrifice a piece in order to get in a better position. Some of my students started making better decisions. One particularly violent 5th grader, named Tim, learned to know when he was losing control and removed himself from the situation. He frequently ended up in my room punching a punching bag rather than the individual who had looked at him wrong. The staff found it amusing when my 1st grader was heard muttering to herself "consider the consequences".

I have no doubt that Jesus considered the consequences. He did not arbitrarily go around dismissing laws. He knew the potential results and was willing to take responsibility for his actions. As Marcus Borg would say "Jesus basically turned things upside down - inviting people to imagine things differently than they had been taught to imagine." What is inside a person is what truly counts. "This is far more important than any ritual required by a religious law."

I always thought that the Jewish dietary laws were based on real health issues, though they may not have known the whys. Today we know the importance of washing hands and food as well as the dangers of poorly prepared food that may pass on disease. Yet, my research showed that many theologians believe that the issue during Jesus' time was simply "purity." Marcus Borg simply says "The issue, of course, is not hygiene but purity."

Jesus' response was that nothing outside a person defiles. Impurity is not contagious. Impurity and purity come from inside - from the heart.

Jesus' message is a "politics of compassion" an invitation to follow a spiritual path. Invitation implies the Creator's Spirit is already present in our lives. This is in contrast to the "politics of purity" required by the Pharisees.

Jesus keeps reminding us that everyone is welcome at the table. Yet, country singer Johnny Paycheck sings a song called "The Outlaw's Prayer" where he is told he can't enter a church "with that big black hat, those jeans, that beard and long hair."

He says:

"You know, Lord, I'm not perfect; some even call me no count.
"But I'll tell you: I believe a man is judged by what's in his heart,
not what's in his bank account.
"So if this is what religion is: a big car, a suit an' a tie,
"Then I might as well forget it Lord, 'cause I can't qualify.

He concludes the song with "Oh, by the way, Lord right before they kicked me out, didn't I see a picture of you? with sandals and a beard. Believe you had long hair too"

As I was researching this scripture the TV was covering Teddy Kennedy's funeral.

One speaker was talking about Kennedy and stated that "he put people first and Government second." Once again priorities. Jesus criticized and disobeyed laws that got in the way of helping people. He healed on the Sabbath, ate with undesirables, sometimes neglected the rules of purity.

A Garth Brooks song "Friends in Low Places" says "Blame it all on my roots, I showed up in boots, and ruined your black tie affair. I got friends in low places, where the whiskey drowns and the beer chases my blues away." UCC's Rev. Eugene Nelson, Jr. points out that we "know the Pharisees didn't like the fact that Jesus had friends in low places."

I fully believe that we are not the kind of church that Johnny Paycheck talks about in his Outlaw's Prayer, but when I hear his song and listen to the music, I can't help but think we need to ask ourselves how might we be like the Pharisees of Jesus' day. Are we as committed to the cause of justice and equality, compassion and peace as much as we believe we are? Or are there times we resort to outward appearance and status quo? How much are we willing to allow our boat of comfort and safety to be rocked?

I believe that the members of the Inclusive Community go a long way toward commitment to justice, equality, compassion and peace, yet I urge us all to search our hearts. I am sure that each of us will find some places where we are like the Pharisees. We may sit quietly listening to jokes and comments that demean others, close our hearts to some that seem particularly unlike us. It is so much easier to follow the rules whatever they may be and criticize those who do not seem to see the error of their ways, rather than deal with contradictions and confusion caused by focusing on compassion.

Therefore I pray:

Dear God,

You are in us and all around us. Together we are co creators. Thank you for the guidance you are giving us as we try to be more like Jesus. Please guide us to be honest with ourselves . Show us where we can open our minds and hearts and more effectively help create heaven here on earth.

Amen