

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

“Pharisee” today means a self-righteous hypocrite, and it’s all because of the way Jesus exposes some of them along with some scribes in today’s gospel. In their own day, Pharisees devoted themselves to strict observance of the law and received respect from religious-minded contemporaries. Today we have people who promote a literal interpretation of civil laws, including the Constitution, and of church laws. Virtuous people who order their lives on such traditions are commendable. The problem is, of course, that sometimes tradition becomes an end in itself. Repetition can obstruct a person from achieving the internal renewal it is supposed to create.

The scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus what they must have considered a reasonable question: “Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?” They had to wonder how Jesus could tolerate something so basic and healthy. Instead Jesus excoriated them, turning the question into testimony against them: Externally they faithfully washed their hands before every meal, but internally they were guilty of evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, and folly. They surely didn’t see that coming from a question about dirty hands.

We’ve all learned the value of laws and traditions; we wouldn’t be here tonight if we hadn’t. But our personal traditions endure for a reason. They aim to achieve a greater good. Whether these are traditions in families, at school, in sports or religion, people repeat them because they work: they create unity around values. Washing hands before eating is a good idea, and I hope Jesus reminded his disciples about that after his tirade. But his main concern is that repetitive traditions can overpower inner virtue. Even though we perform good actions out of habit, they may not have the deep effect upon us that they should. We all know people who came to church regularly, said prayers at home faithfully, but still committed abuses and crimes that showed how shallow they were.

Sometimes we are fully aware of the hypocrisy within us. At other times, it completely escapes our view until someone points it out. We become so attached to our routines that we don’t see how empty they have become, how much time and energy we give them, how inconvenient they may be for other people, and how they may be taking us away from what really matters.

The very thought of breaking a routine frightens some people. The routine almost becomes superstitious. We don’t know who we’ll be if we don’t do things the same way. Repetition is a great way to achieve personal development, but there may come a time when it hasn’t kept up with the needs of today, and we’ve overlooked some problems we should have addressed long ago but never did.

We don’t know how these scribes and Pharisees dealt with this. Did that conversation harden their views toward Jesus? That’s what the gospels imply. But maybe Jesus got through to one or another of them. Maybe someone heard his challenge about cleansing the heart, and not just the hands. If so, it wouldn’t have been easy. It never is. But sometimes breaking a habit brings better results than keeping it.

Sunday, August 29, 2021