

Rev. Derek Fairman

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time B

In the Gospel passage, we hear the Pharisees and some scribes from Jerusalem question the Lord Jesus about His disciples. They do not wash their hands and they do not observe other rituals like the rest of the Jewish people. The Lord teaches them and us that what comes from within us can defile us. What does He mean?

Washing one's hands is a sign of purification. In the Law of Moses, the priests were required to wash before entering the Temple to worship God. The washing that the priests performed became associated with purification but also with holiness. The notion of all the Jewish people washing their hands was a human tradition. More than likely it began as a good idea, from a desire for the entire Jewish people, not just the priests, to be holy.

However, it was only a human tradition, and not actually a commandment given by God. As with many merely human traditions, anger and fear and many other things can make a good idea into something bad. As we hear in the Gospel, the Pharisees and some scribes questioned the Lord Jesus about His disciples, and why they did not conform. What began as an optional practice, which probably started out as a good idea, wound up becoming an accusation against the Lord's disciples, as if their nonconformity was evidence of their lack of holiness.

The Lord points out that holiness is a matter of rejecting the evils that come from within us. He reacts negatively to the Pharisees and some of the scribes, not to the desire to be holy that likely existed at the beginning of these traditions, but to the way that fear and peer pressure had warped that desire into something else entirely.

However, the Lord does teach His disciples about the desire for holiness and the desire for purity. When it comes to purity, our actions and words come from within us, from what is in our hearts and on our minds. When it comes to holiness, our outward practices are meant to correspond to our inward intentions.

What does this mean for us? The Gospel teaches us many things, but one thing that we can focus on is our speech. We must be careful when it comes to the way that we speak. St. James reminds us of this in his letter. He writes, "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, his religion is vain." He also reminds us that the tongue can be like a small fire that can set an entire forest ablaze. He writes that with our tongues we can bless God but curse each other. But that should not be the case.

He asks whether the same spring should bring forth fresh water and brackish water: of course not. He asks whether the fig tree produces olives, or whether the grapevine produces figs. No, they do not, and he reminds us that whatever comes from our mouths comes from a deeper source, from our hearts and our minds. He also teaches us that the tongue can be like a small rudder controlling a large boat. Our words have an effect upon our souls and steer us in the wrong direction.

We know that there are many ways that we can choose words that we regret. Whether it is engaging in gossip, sharing an inappropriate joke, using profanity or insulting someone, there is no shortage of ways that our tongues can steer us in the wrong direction. These wrong ways of using words come from within us and indicate a lack of purity, a lack of virtue and a lack of holiness. There is a deeper source to our words.

Our wrong use of words also has real consequences. They are a bad example to children, and those around us. They can also hurt people very deeply. We do not always know the ways that our words hurt others. We may only find out much later in life, or even in the next life. These wrong ways of using words also hurt ourselves, because they take away our holiness, lead us away from God and they make us lose sight of what matters to God.

Most especially harmful is the use of God's name in vain. God has given us His name to call upon Him when we come to church to worship Him, and when we call upon Him in prayer. However, using His name casually or to curse is especially offensive to Him. When someone else uses God's name wrongly, and we are recounting what happened, we do not have to repeat exactly what was spoken, and in fact we never should.

When the Mother of God visited two children in La Sallette in the French Pyrenees mountains in 1846, an apparition the Church has approved, she complained that those who drive the carts cannot swear without introducing the name of her Son. She also explained that the potato crop had spoiled, and when that happened many swore and took the name of her Son in vain. These were some of the reasons that her Son was so displeased.

As we approach the altar, we ask the Lord to give us purity of heart and mind. When our hearts and minds are pure, our words will demonstrate the holiness within us. The more we choose our words carefully, the more we will grow in holiness and wisdom. Coming to Mass and prayer are ways in which we can call upon God worthily. We pray that our words will please God and will bring joy and comfort to others.