

Homily for the 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 1-2, 2018

Readings: Deuteronomy: 4:1-2, 6-8; James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Preacher: Marlene Bessette

My heart is very heavy and my eyes are moist...how am I to reconcile a teaching of the church that conflicts with the love in my heart?

I am sure that many of us have found ourselves in this position over the course of our lives. During such times we are encouraged to fully understand the scripture, reasoning and tradition supporting the teaching, seek out knowledgeable guidance, and do a careful examination of conscience before deciding a course of action. The complexities of life and the unique circumstances of the real people involved must be brought into consideration. Our faith should not require blind obedience but rather, loving action guided by an educated and well-formed conscience.

The readings this weekend revolve around the truth and law handed down by God to humanity or crafted by humans to maintain fidelity to our beliefs and protect our religious identity from succumbing to temptations to bend toward immorality, to turn away from God. These are noble and just intentions.

The first reading from Deuteronomy tells us that human laws are derived from truths given to humanity by God and carried on through tradition. We hear Moses telling the Israelites “you shall not add to what I command you nor subtract from it.”

Yet in Mark’s gospel Jesus chastises the Pharisees, calling them hypocrites after they challenge his orthodoxy because his disciples “ate their meals with unclean hands” not in keeping with the tradition of the elders.

You can almost hear Jesus’ frustration when he quotes from Isaiah: “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.” It’s important to understand that

the ritual of washing before eating was a distinguishing feature of Judaism, not some hollow ritual; hand washing was a sign of religious identity in a world where Jews were oppressed, being urged to conform to Roman rule and control; these acts preserved their religious identity and fidelity.

So Jesus' challenge to this ritual was not lightly done. By doing so, he is calling us to an even greater level fidelity: A fidelity of the heart. Jesus tells us that true defilement has to do with what passes in and out of the heart, not the body—it's not how we obey and succumb to rules but how we love and that love must be manifest in all we do. When rules inhibit loving response, love must win out, otherwise we suffer hypocrisy of the heart.

I was initially planning to pick up on the hypocrisy theme in Mark's gospel and acknowledge the anger and disgust that arises anew with every news account about who knew what when and how they did or didn't protect our children from sexual abuse. And although that weighs heavily on our collective conscience these days, I am being drawn to pray on the second reading from the second letter of James: "Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

The announcement last week that Buffalo Catholic Charities is pulling out of adoption and foster care services after 95 years, due to an inability to reconcile the teaching of the church on same sex couples versus NYS law banning discrimination due to sexual orientation presents such a quandary.

How do I reconcile the teaching of the church with the love in my heart? The love of friends and relatives who are gay or lesbian and who would be crushed to be considered unfit to parent? The love of children who are in desperate need of safe and loving homes who now have to wait longer to find that home? It would be easy if the situations in our world yielded to black and white answers, to simply following the rules. But what are we to do when following the rules becomes a hypocrisy of the heart?

The only solution that I can come up with is to pray, reflect, study and then pray some more. Then follow the path that God's love charts.