

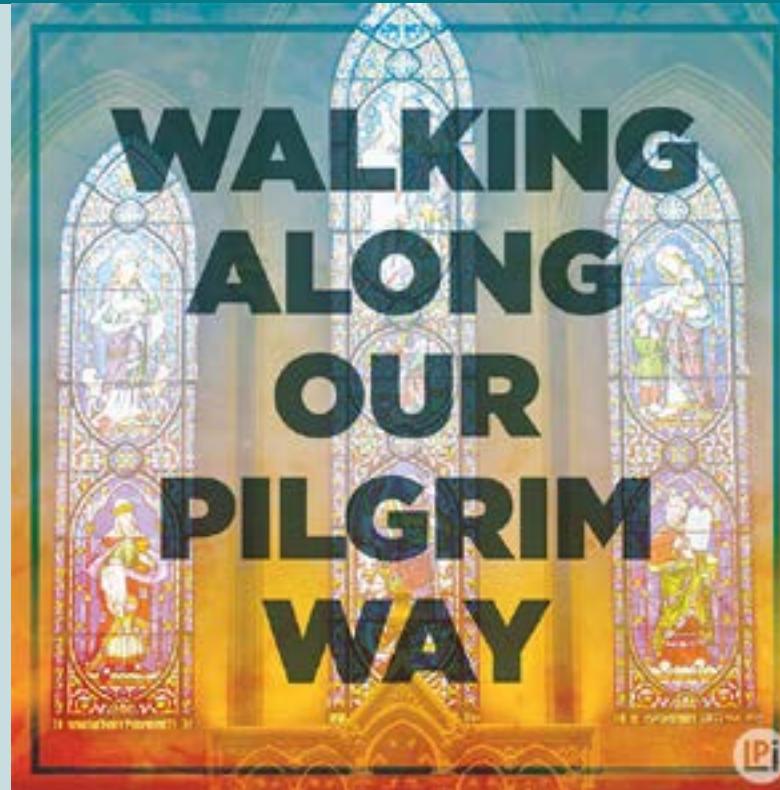
CONNECT! SUNDAY REFLECTION

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time | For Sunday, August 29, 2021

True Disciples of Jesus

Written by Br. Silas Henderson, S.D.S.

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



*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?"*

*Jesus 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."*

Mark 7:5-7

We live in a world filled with rules and restrictions. The rules — especially the laws — that govern our day-to-day lives are ideally there for the order of society and the safety of others.

Our introduction to rules comes early. It's hard to imagine a family that didn't have "household rules" about bedtimes, curfews, meals and snacks, and television. More recently, family rules have also come to include social networking and gaming. As we grow older, we encounter rules in school and in the workplace. In fact, while we might not think of them in this way, the policies and procedures that guide much of our academic and professional lives are, in fact, rules. This same reality holds true for the Church. Canon law and diocesan or parish policies set the course for the prayer and ministry of parishes and religious communities all over the world.

In the [Gospel we hear proclaimed this Sunday](#), we're presented with a tense scene in which Jesus and his followers are being publicly criticized by certain religious leaders for disregarding rules of ritual washing.

Although something like ritual washings — including handwashing — might seem unimportant to us today, this act was an essential part of daily, religious observance for certain Jews at the time of Jesus. The Pharisees and scribes (two Jewish groups that prided themselves on their faithful religious observance) attacked Jesus and his disciples for not following the rules for purity that have been handed down to them.

These ritual acts of washing hands and feet go back to the [Book of Exodus](#) (cf. 30:19, 40:12) and were originally only intended for priests who were entering the Tent of Meeting. Centuries later, in the time of Jesus, some Jews who were not priests had begun to ritually wash before prayer and meals and had even extended the ritual to their cooking utensils and food. They believed that the customs they had adopted should be universal and that to be faithful meant that everyone would follow *their* religious customs and devotions.

Jesus, a poor tradesman from a poor village, would have understood that these kind of rules would have been nearly impossible for poor farmers and fishermen, especially given the scarcity of water and the frequent contact they would have had with dead fish and other things that would make them “ritually unclean.” Only a privileged few could live by the strict rules of the Pharisees and scribes, most of whom were well-off and living in cities.

In response to the criticisms hurled at him, Jesus reminded his critics of what is truly important by challenging them to change their focus: it isn’t external realities that make us “unclean” or the observance of specific rules that ensures that we’re in a right relationship with God. Instead, it is our intentions and the purity of our hearts that matter most to God: “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.”

Rules and traditions are incredibly important, as they help us solidify our identity as Catholic-Christians. At the same time, we have to be sure that we don’t become so fixated on the details of certain traditions or teachings that we risk losing sight of what is most important: The Gospel of Jesus Christ. Rules and traditions — however important and venerable they may be — can never be an end in themselves. If they are good and worthwhile, they will always lead us to a closer relationship with God and help us live out our faith in ways that also lead others to God. We also must respect the integrity of Divine Revelation, understanding that Scripture and tradition go hand-in-hand and interpret one another, recognizing that these are guideposts for us as we walk along our pilgrim way. To focus on or ignore any one teaching or value while ignoring or dismissing others that are equally important is to risk undermining the integrity of the whole.

With this in mind, Pope Francis shared this reflection in [The Joy of the Gospel](#): “Christian morality is not a form of stoicism, or self-denial, or merely a practical philosophy or a catalogue of sins and faults. Before all else, the Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others. Under no circumstances can this invitation be obscured! All of the virtues are at the service of this response to love.”

PRAYER

God of might, giver of every good gift,
put into our hearts the love of your name,
so that, by deepening our sense of reverence,
you may nurture in us what is good
and, by your watchful care,
keep safe what you have nurtured.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the
unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever. Amen.

(from *The Roman Missal*)

[The second reading](#) of this Sunday’s Mass reminds us of what is essential if we are to call ourselves true disciples of Jesus: “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” (James 1:22, 27). The invitation is for us to open our minds and hearts to look beyond the details of the “letter of the law,” to find the freedom that comes from living according to the greatest commandments: love God and love one another.

Br. Silas Henderson, S.D.S.