

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time - B

I'm sure you've all heard of the term "armchair quarterback." That's the guy who is good about commenting on the faults and failings of the players on the field or the coach on the sidelines, but who couldn't begin to fit into a uniform.

In one sense that's what we are dealing with in today's Gospel. The Pharisees and scribes are quite observant about whether Jesus' disciples are measuring up to the expectations that had arisen when it came to following the Law. But when it came to understanding what the Law was really about, they were missing the point completely.

As is so often the case, especially in matters of religion, the Pharisees' problem sprang from good practices that had gone awry and taken on a life of their own—sort of like some of the traditions of the Church that we maintain, but when asked about their meaning we come up blank.

According to Jewish tradition, God gave Moses the law as a guide to help humans fulfill their role as co-workers with God in the ongoing process of creation.

The first reading brings that to the fore. The Law pointed out the path to life and outlined the plan for establishing a holy nation that was to be a light to all the other nations, so that they might have life, too.

By design, following the Law the people of God would come to know how to carry forward God's plan for all people. By collaborating with that plan they would enjoy communion with God, even in this world.

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time - B

That was the plan.

But that plan fell under the influence of competitive, scrupulous, self-righteous legalistic human beings.

The original intention was good. Wise people developed customs and practices designed to safeguard the law by interpreting how it should be put into practice in everyday situations.

If the Law said that priests should perform rituals washings, why not have everybody do it? That seemed like a good way to go. Until you got to the reality that not everybody could maintain such a high level of ritual purity—because of their work, for example, or their health or their gender.

The end result was that the community got segregated into those who could follow not only the Law but the customs that grew up around it, and those who couldn't.

And from there it's a short hop to looking down on the ones who couldn't.

That's something Jesus knew he had to address. The Law had become distorted and was no longer serving the purpose God intended for it. It was not longer life-giving so much as a burden.

Obviously, that problem is not unique to the Pharisees in 1st century Judea. Every human society and every religious tradition is prone to promote self-serving elitism and exclusion of those labeled as “the others.”

Jesus responded to the purity police by citing the

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time - B

prophetic tradition. He quotes Isaiah to bring to light what seems to be the underlying motive: “Is hand washing a sign of your need to be cleansed from sin or has it become a purity show?”

This leads us to consider our own pious practices. When the priest invites us at the beginning of Mass to call to mind our sins so that we can humbly celebrate God’s saving action in the Eucharist, what do we do? Just wait until the Mass starts moving again? Or do we really see the point of entering into that penitential moment?

Before the prayer of consecration the priest washes his hands while praying, “Lord, wash away my iniquity. Cleanse me from my sin” as a way of humbling acknowledging his unworthiness to participate in the profound mystery he is about to pray. If that is done on auto-pilot, the value is lost.

Jesus recognized that the Pharisees concern for purity was really masking their hardness of heart. They were blocking God’s saving grace from touching their hearts by refusing to acknowledge their own weakness and need for salvation.

We can avoid that trap by being willing to reach out to those in need. Nothing puts matters into perspective quite so well as being attentive to those whose lives are much more difficult than ours.

That’s where efforts such as this mission appeal can be a help not only to the people served by the funds raised, but also to us who have a tendency to make

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time - B

some matters more important than they really are.

The missions we serve are in Honduras, the 2nd poorest country, after Haiti, in the western hemisphere, Zambia, formerly known as Northern Rhodesia, and India, which was recently inundated with flooding from a monsoon season that started early and threatens to stay late.

In all three places the friars are occupied primarily in simply sharing life with those to whom the minister—providing opportunities for education to those who would otherwise go without, protection from gangs and the violence they bring, and in dire circumstances such as now persist in Kerala in southern India simply sharing their facilities with the thousands that have been driven from their homes.

We are asking for your help, quite simply, because we can't respond to all the needs on our own. Can you find room in your heart and in your pocket book to provide tuition and school supplies for one Honduran child, or shoes for a Zambian student who is not allowed into the government schools barefoot, or emergency food for an Indian family who will need to wait months until they can go back to their own home.

Thank you for whatever provisions you can make. We know that we are all in this together, and your support is a cause for grateful praise from those who receive your generosity. It gives them reason to trust in a God who can move hearts and extend his mercy to wherever it is needed.