

Pastor's Homily – 22nd Sunday of Year B – Sept. 2nd 2018

“This people honors with me with their lips. But, their hearts are far from me” (the words of Jesus quoting Isaiah). Who does that sound like? It was meant to be equated to the scribes and Pharisees! But who does it sound like today? Its sounds like the religious leaders of the church, in the wake of all that's unfolding.

Last week in the bulletin letter, I addressed the horrific scandal of abuse done by religious leaders whose hearts were far from God, even as their words claimed piety and allegiance. Last week in the Gospel, the people said: all that that we see and hear is *“hard to take;”* and, they were *“murmuring”* about all that was happening (then)! Jesus inquired, *“Do you want to leave me?”* Many did leave and returned to their former ways of life. Then he turned to his apostles and said: *“Do you want to leave me too?”* Simon Peter said: *“Lord, to whom shall we go? YOU have the words of Life Eternal.”*

The bottom line for me is: the church has always had and will always have Judas-popes; Judas-bishops, Judas-priests and Judas-lay folks who can talk a good game, but whose hearts are far from God. That's because of the perpetual reality in this world of original sin and actual sin. The horrible news about all this can lead some to conclude that that the *‘ship’* of the Church has run aground and is sinking. If we'd we been attacked by pirates, the losses might not be as hard to take. But the damage done comes not at the hand of outsiders, but from a mutiny below decks by some of the ship's own crew. And *that* makes the saga even more difficult, more impossible to fathom.

So maybe there's a sinking *feeling*, yes. But in fact, the *‘ship’* of the Church hasn't run aground and it certainly hasn't sunk. For sure, the church is stalled in the doldrums of abuse, shame and anger. But, in most parishes, life aboard continues because of the presence of the Holy Spirit! Even with Judas within the company of Jesus (Himself), the mission had to continue, and did with the motley but faithful crew that He had assembled.

Yet, for the church now, it can never more be *“business as usual”* in the face of such grievous sin and its horrific damage to individuals, to their families and to the whole faith community. Like Jesus, whose Body we are, the Church (that's us) is called to be a *wounded healer*. But perhaps some folks you know (or family members) may be thinking of leaving, abandoning the ship. Nevertheless, you're here, and I urge you to stay on board to help in the recovery.

When we uncover problems in the house we live in, even serious structural problems, we take responsibility for repairing them, even if we weren't the ones who built the house. The Church is the Body of Christ and *you* and *I* are its members!

So, sinking feelings? Yes. Taking on water? For sure. But *“shipwrecked??”* No! Jesus is the Captain of our *ship* of faith and with His grace and help we can and we will continue our *ship's* journey onward. As I wrote in the bulletin letter last week – don't leave Jesus because of Judas. Don't leave Jesus because of the religious personnel whose hearts are very far from God. Don't leave the church because of Judas!

Just as last week's Gospel was so timely, once again the Gospel today is well-suited for the crisis we now face. Controversy is the theme of today's Gospel. Jesus equally challenged sinners and saints to *“look within their hearts.”* He draws attention to the fact that: *it's “things that come from within (within our hearts; and within our church) that can defile”* and can corrupt the whole body.

All human beings including *“religious”* people (like us) have some degree of defilement from within: evil thoughts, un-chastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly! The *“list”* of heart-born evils is rather long and at least one item probably *hits home* to any sincere listener. Just as some of the horrible stories we've been hearing are graphic, so, Jesus uses an explicit, graphic and striking parallel as he draws an earthy analogy from our universal experience of digestion.

Anything that goes into a person from the outside can't defile since it *enters* not the heart but the stomach and passes through. That's why even God's House (this place) needs restrooms! But it's what comes out of the heart and mind that corrupts. One can have very clean hands - but a dirty heart. So, neither ritual or religion (on either side of the altar) or anything else makes us clean or unclean in the sight of God. Rather, it's our mind-set, or better-still our "heart-set" that makes us pleasing to God: being "doers of the word, not just hearers."

That's the message of Jesus in this dispute with the Pharisees when they charged his disciples with eating without washing their hands. This ancient conflict over "ritual cleanliness" can strike us as irrelevant in our enlightened age. But the principle spoken by Jesus is at the heart of his message. In fact, it may be more important today than ever in view of the sophisticated ways in which human beings harbor destructive moods and motives within ourselves!

The Pharisees (and the church) seemed to have lost the connection (and credibility) between faith and what it intends. They *obsessed* over the exterior (the show; the vesture, the performance) yet their hearts were far from pure. How could they even speak about the purification of things like cups and jugs and beds, when their hearts were full of un-chastity, malice, greed and arrogance? Sound familiar?

Like children, they straightened up their rooms by pushing everything under a neatly made bed. Remember that they never fooled mom (or dad). And it would hardly suffice to deceive God! We all continue to be tempted by the sin of the Pharisees because we tend to make things look O.K./or good on the outside.

Jesus pointed out that we can think the marital bed is neatly made when we don't actually commit adultery. Still we can view others as objects to be possessed and betray our loved ones (or the church) 1,000 times over by tiny acts of disloyalty or callous disregard. In the same way, we might not go out and kill our neighbor, yet we can speak so negatively of him, or with prejudice and contempt. The poison in our hearts is revealed by these thoughts! And the fact that we haven't broken a commandment in half, by no means implies that we've kept it. Does it?

So, Jesus tells us that real disciples are those who continually seek to purge their hearts of the cob-webs that gather in the shadowy corners of our lives. If our motivation is not yet 100% pure, we still have work to do as do the scribes and Pharisees of today. But that's why we come back Sunday after Sunday to the Word of God and the Eucharist each week – to be strengthened in our resolve not just to be "hearers but doers" of God's word.

It is important to get the word out there and to acknowledge that yes, the religious leaders of our day have honored God with piety, but their hearts have been far from Him. The teachers have failed us – but the teachings haven't! Don't leave Jesus because of Judas. Don't leave Jesus because of the Evil One. Don't leave Jesus because of the Church. He is the Captain of this ship, which can dramatically drift off course, but the Mission and his Word (his challenge) can never sink or fail us.

Let us stand and profess the faith that gives us hope and direction for the one, holy, and apostolic church.