

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

The gospel today is about one of those conflicts between Jesus, his followers, and the Jewish religion of the time.

The Pharisees are noticing that some of the people following Jesus are not observing the ritual-purity laws around cleanliness of their hands, their eating utensils, bowls and cups. These particular disciples of course were Gentiles who had no knowledge of these rituals in the first place. So this new religion was taking shape, it's members are a blend of diverse people—Jews, AND converts, like Greeks, Samaritans, Egyptians, Just like the world wide Catholic church is now— a blend of cultures and peoples.

This was the beginning of new rituals and rules and the movement away from the practices of the Jews. And this seems like little stuff to us, doesn't it?

BUT These things were really important issues at the time. and so, Jesus challenges the Pharisees [as he is prone to doing] and explains that it is not what one does on the outside that defiles a person or makes them holy, but it is what comes from the heart that is the true measure of the person, for good or

for bad. Yes, folks, it is what comes from inside that makes us who we truly are. In other words, what starts in our thoughts is likely to come out as our behavior. I'm sure you've all heard this one, "watch your thoughts, they become words; watch your words, they become actions; watch your actions, they become habits; watch your habits, they become character; watch your character, for it becomes your destiny."

Looking at the ancient Jewish concept of the heart, I think that these days, we would call this a person's character. I found that for the Jews the word HEART meant the mind, the thoughts, governing behavior. When the Jewish people are told to love The Lord with all their heart (Deut 6:5) it is not talking about emotional love, they are being asked to keep their minds and thoughts working for the Lord.

Ancient Hebrew is a pictorial language. Instead of being written with an alphabet, their script is an arrangement of symbolic little pictures. Here is the Hebrew word for heart. The first picture in this Hebrew word is a shepherd staff and represents authority, Like the shepherd has authority over his flock.

The second letter [they tell me] is picture of the floor plan of a nomadic tent and represents the idea of being inside, like the family resides within the tent. I know, I don't see it either, but stick with me here.

When they combine these two symbols they mean "the authority within". For them the "heart" was the essence of the person. How they really are deep down. Or like I said before, their essential character.

So we can understand better what Jesus is saying here. If my inner authority includes this lists of vices: evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly, — and I am trying to be a good Christian— then I have a real problem, because what comes out of my heart is what really matters to me, and no amount of acting holy on the outside is really going to rescue my poor soul.

Mark Twain wrote, "What a wee little part of a person's life are his acts and his words! His real life is led in his head, and is known to none but himself.

All day long, the mill of his brain is grinding, and his thoughts, not those other things, are his history.”

I think that is very perceptive and very true. I would disagree with him a little and say that our thoughts are the basis for our actions and words. But HE IS right when he says that our thoughts make up a major part of who we really are.

One theologian put it this way: “The ideas and images in men’s minds are the invisible powers that constantly govern them” (source unknown). So, it is really important for each of us to bring our thoughts into submission to Jesus Christ by first learning to examine every aspect of life, our thoughts, our words and our actions.

One of the most helpful things we can keep in mind about the Christian life is that all sin begins in our thoughts, or at our center which the in todays reading Jesus calls “the heart”.

It seems to me that one expression we use currently is pretty close to the ancient Jewish meaning of the word—that is when we have a change of heart. We talk about that at dramatic times in our lives don't we? YES!—that is when we make a 180 degree turn in our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, then we have truly had a change of heart. Something has affected us so deeply we see no option but to change who we are. These are the times when Perhaps we ask the Lord to help us let go of some of those things that defile us from within.

In other words, we become holy when we allow God's Spirit to transform us and change our hearts. Our actions should be an expression of the conversion of our will to God's will and to God's ways.

Jesus' words challenge us today. In our desire to show that we are holy, we maybe sometimes give too much credence to externals. Today we have a gospel story with a strong connection to the over all message of Jesus Christ. The Kingdom of God is achievable by repentance and a radical change of heart. Loving God with our entire being and loving our neighbor as ourself.

