**Homily for the 22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B**

**August 29, 2021**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8 (Moses exhorts the Israelites to observe God’s statutes.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 15 (The one who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord.)*

*Second Reading: James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27 (Be doers of the word and not hearers only.)*

*Gospel: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 (The things that defile a person come from within.)*

I hate it when today’s gospel comes up at one of our St. Bavo school masses. Imagine how difficult it is to explain to little children why Jesus tells us that we don’t need to wash our hands before eating, as all of our parents taught us to do. In fact, the traditions that Jesus is challenging – that of purifying hands and cups and jugs and kettles and beds, and countless other things – have nothing to do with proper hygiene. The people of Jesus’ day knew nothing about the transmission of disease through germs invisible to the naked eye. These purity laws were all about protecting oneself from *corrupting influences*, which could render a person unclean in the sight of God. The issue was *spiritual* cleanliness, not *physical* cleanliness. The Pharisees and scribes saw the world as filled with evils which could attach to a person without their knowledge or consent, leaving them temporarily “defiled” (or “unclean”). Jesus, however, rejected that notion entirely. He says, “Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from *within* are what defile.” Jesus does not dismiss the very real danger of corrupting influences in society, but he insists that the state of our soul depends entirely on *us* – *our* thoughts, *our* words and *our* actions. Our personal choices determine whether we remain pure in the sight of God or become defiled by that which comes out of us.

Jesus was actually pointing out *two* fundamental flaws in the Pharisees’ and scribes’ thinking. First, these so-called legal scholars demonstrated a remarkably poor understanding of the law. They taught human traditions as if they were on a par with divine commandments. In fact, Jesus frequently accused them of *prioritizing* human traditions over God’s laws. For example, Jesus tells them at one point to go back to their study of the Prophets to understand what it means that God desires mercy, not sacrifice. The Pharisees and scribes were obsessed with ritual, but cared little for the needy, the vulnerable, or the repentant sinner. To Jesus, it seemed that they were turning the law on its head in order to push their own agenda. Secondly, the Pharisees and scribes badly misunderstood the whole concept of holiness and purity. For them, purity was a matter of remaining untouched by *other people’s sin*. For Jesus, purity is a matter of living in obedience to God’s will, and avoiding all that truly offends God.

In the reading that we heard from Deuteronomy, Moses exhorts all of his fellow Israelites to “hear the statutes and decrees” of the Lord. In this context, of course, “to hear” means more than to be within earshot as Moses is speaking. It means to listen attentively to the Word of the Lord and to put it into practice, fulfilling the entirety of the law by a holy way of life. It’s this faithful witness, lived out on a daily basis, which will prove the Israelites’ wisdom and intelligence to all the nations. Foreigners will see what a just law the God of Israel has given to his people, commandments that are neither harsh nor oppressive, but life-giving. Rather than binding the Israelites to a miserable and precarious existence, constantly under threat of divine punishment for any misstep, God’s law was supposed to order Israelite society in conformity with God’s will, so that all could flourish and be at peace. They would be the most blessed of all nations, for they would be able to live in harmony with each other and with their God. Thus, it was imperative that no one add to or subtract from the laws that God provided, or else the whole structure could collapse and fail.

Unfortunately, the Israelites and their descendants did not heed Moses’ warning. In subsequent generations, they violated the most basic provisions of the law. Their prophets repeatedly called them to task for idolatry and a gross inattention to social justice. At the same time, their religious leaders continued to pile up hundreds of traditions *based* on the law, but not necessarily in conformity with God’s will. Over time, these traditions acquired an authority equal to the revealed Word of God. However, throughout the Gospel, Jesus challenges many of those man-made religious traditions, which he considers misinterpretations of God’s law. For example, he frequently challenges Sabbath restrictions and laws regarding fasting. Then, in today’s passage, he takes direct aim at an entire class of purity laws. By declaring that nothing from outside a person can make him unclean, Jesus virtually wipes out the whole concept of ritual impurity. But, in so doing, he also redefines purity and defilement in accord with God’s design.

Following up on Jesus’ teaching, St. James declares that “religion that is pure and undefiled” consists of two parts. One is “keeping oneself unstained by the world.” That may sound like the Pharisaical understanding of uncleanness that Jesus rejected, but it’s actually quite different. James is not speaking about avoiding sinful people, lest their impurity rub off on us and defile us. Instead, he is talking about recognizing which aspects of popular culture clash with God’s will, and choosing to follow *God’s way* instead of just following the crowd. If we fail, the stain that marks us will be the stain of our sin, not of the evil world around us. As Jesus said, our purity depends on us and our conduct, not on anyone else.

The other key aspect of pure and undefiled religion, according to James, is “to care for orphans and widows in their affliction.” In other words, true religion must prioritize care for the needy and vulnerable in society. And that, obviously, requires *engagement* with the world, not withdrawal from it. The spirituality of the Pharisees and scribes was self-righteous and elitist, pulling back from others out of fear and judgment. Authentic Christian spirituality, by contrast, must be humble and inclusive, reaching out to others out of love and solidarity.

James’ brief summary of pure and undefiled religion highlights the balance that is required for a truly holy life, in accord with God’s will. We must pay equal attention to the *internal* and the *external* – remaining pure in our thoughts, words and actions, while also caring deeply for all those around us. Far too many people focus on only *one* of these aspects to the exclusion of the other. Some become overly scrupulous, obsessively examining themselves to the point where they hardly even notice the needs of other people. Others become champions of social justice, but neglect their own need for spiritual growth and the pursuit of personal holiness. *We need both* in order to fulfill the law and to live as God intended.