

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

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The Church of Jesus the Good Shepherd

August 30, 2009

At the Open House on Tuesday night I was standing in line with parents and students waiting to get my hotdog when I heard words that took me back to my childhood. A mother walked up to the line and asked her son, "Did you wash your hands?" The boy gave no answer he merely walked over to a sink on the wall in the cafeteria and washed his hands. Hand washing is a part of our lives and has been for a long time. It is a hygienic act we perform in order to protect ourselves from unwanted disease. As the Swine Flu gained steam in the past year one of the recurring themes of medical professionals has been to urge everyone to wash their hands. Whenever I go to a hospital to visit parishioners I see up and down the hallways hand sanitizing stations. Hand washing has long been a part of religious life as well. It was an edict of God to the priests of the Old Covenant to cleanse themselves for ritual purity. And it is a practice that the Church adopted as well.

There are two times that I wash my hands in an act of piety and for the purpose of following the rubrics of the Mass. The first time is in the sacristy as I pray the vesting prayers. This is not a requirement but it is something I do for my own personal devotion and prayer in preparation for celebrating the Holy Mass. The prayer that I pray at this first ritual cleansing is **“Give virtue to my hands, O Lord, that being cleansed from all stain I might serve you with purity of mind and body.”** The second time I wash my hands is during the Preparation Rites for the Eucharistic Prayer. After we have offered up the bread and wine to God I wash my hands and I pray **“Lord wash away my iniquity and cleanse me of my sins”**. In both instances the hand washing is to be indicative of an interior conversion. Washing our hands as a religious practice is not something that is wrong in and of itself, but if it can become a stumbling block, as can any practice, when the practice becomes more important to us than our interior conversion.

The reason we use water and the reason it is so important in our religious symbolism is because water is the very sustenance of our lives. We pass through the waters of baptism to enter the Church. In the same way that Israel passed through the Red Sea to be cleansed of Egypt's hold on them and how they crossed through the mighty Jordan to leave behind all of their failings and sinfulness as they left the desert after forty years and entered the Promised Land. We do a similar act every time we come to Mass. As we enter the doors of the Church we dip our finger into the Baptismal or a Holy Water Font and make the sign of the Cross. We do this not only to remind us of our baptism but also to leave behind those vestiges of the outside world that often cling to us and distract from entering the presence of God. But how many of us believe that dipping our finger in the font is absolutely necessary for us to truly enter into the presence to God? And how many of us would sit in judgment of another if they failed to do this pious devotion on entering the Church?

That is exactly the point that Our Blessed Lord is making in the Gospel today. He is reminding us that our religious practices are not in place so that we can follow a certain plan of action and then at the end of our life we enter paradise. There is nothing that says if we pray 10,000 rosaries, if we do 400 Novenas, if we attend Mass every Sunday, if we take a retreat every year, if we follow all the commandments to the letter then at the end of our life we get to go to Heaven. All of those practices are good and if you do them more than likely you will enter heaven at the end of your life. But each of those practices is not the end in itself they are merely means given to us by Our Lord through His Church to help us on our pilgrim journey. What matters to God is not how many devotions we do but whether or not we have loving hearts. These devotions, especially staying near the sacraments, will help us foster a loving heart better than anything else. But in order to foster a loving heart we must have the proper disposition when we engage in them.

There is a story that a young man was sitting next to an older lady one day at Mass. As the Mass progressed he noticed that she was dutifully praying her rosary. She did not sing with assembly, she did not make any of the responses she just prayed her rosary. When it reached the point of the time to give one another a sign of peace he offered his hand to her. She responded "I don't do that can't you see that I am praying." This is a perfect example of what Christ was talking about. If we allow our own personal practices to separate us from the community then we have missed the point. We do not gather here week after week to worship God alone. We come together as a community to worship God with one voice. Our salvation is not about me and God, our salvation is about us and God. I ask that you look to your right and left. Look at the people who are around you. These are the people who are journeying with you on the road to salvation. It takes all of us together to work out our salvation. One of the great differences between us and our protestant brothers and sisters is that they see their entire faith life about their own personal salvation. As

Catholics we must recognize that our faith life is not about our own personal salvation but about the salvation of the whole world. The sacraments themselves speak of this most beautifully, especially the sacraments of service: Holy matrimony and Holy Orders. In each of these sacraments the purpose is not about my own personal salvation but about the salvation of others. On the day a man and woman unite themselves to one another in Holy Matrimony they have now taken on the responsibility of helping their spouse attain heaven. And when a young man lays down his life on the cold marble of a Cathedral Church he takes on the responsibility of the salvation of souls. His life is to be spent in helping others attain their salvation. Each of us shares in that responsibility to one another of helping one another be saved.

I of course am not telling you that we can just do whatever we want without regard to the teachings of Holy Mother Church but what I am saying is that we must have the proper disposition. We must follow the teachings of the Church because they draw us closer to God who is love

and they should foster within us a deep love and respect for one another. But if they become our ultimate goal and not a tool on the journey then we must re-examine why we do this practice or that one. Is it to foster a deeper love of God and neighbor or is it just something I do. In my own devotional life there are times when I just go through the motions but what we must remember is that during those times we need to persevere. It is through our perseverance during difficult times that we are able to attain our own salvation and assist our brothers and sisters in attaining theirs.