

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 2, 2012

Every morning I cringe when I notice the grime at the front doors leading into the Josephinum. Staff members now wash the sidewalk daily and volunteers wipe the door windows spotless before Sunday Mass. However, each night, handprints, coffee, food, body grease leave the building again smeared and dull. I often think that the filthy sidewalk reflects on the residents and our ability to keep our building clean and appropriate for people to enter to pray. If you want to live in downtown Seattle, you've got to insulate yourself from those people.

I also see the reasons why the greasy, ugly prints show up in the first place. The grunge on the sidewalk speaks loudly about our ministry among those who sleep in the doorways, the dozens of people who come to us needing our attention and the basics of life. The real building and authentic stewardship are the people who struggle for clothing, food and a warm shower each morning of the year. Jesus tells us to be stewards of his real property, the people on the street.

One day in another parish as I was helping distribute communion, a young man of about twenty approached the newly installed pastor next to me. The person's clothes were not exactly clean and his hands looked like they had never been washed by soap. The priest refused the man communion. Because I was visiting the parish as mentor and Vicar for Clergy, I couldn't help leaving him one question to ponder following Mass. "Do you believe those burly fisherman who received from Jesus his Body and Blood at the Last Supper really had well-scrubbed hands?"

These true stories reflect the conflict in today's Gospel and challenge us to ask ourselves: Is our piety more important than compassion and justice? Even though it was never required in the Old Testament Law for people to wash their hands before eating, many, as we have heard read here in verse 5 of Mark's Gospel, began to copy what the elders among their religious leaders did. Observing the Law had become an end in itself. By the time of Jesus, two-thirds of this man-made version of the Torah had to do with food, its preparation, its cleansing.

Jesus never spoke out against these pious acts of purity. After all, they were downright practical. In those days your silverware was your hands. And who in their right mind would want someone who had just come in to dinner from trimming his sheep's hooves to share a meal without washing their hands? No, Jesus wasn't against these pious rites but he believed they had become more important than acts of justice, love, forgiveness, and compassion.

And so, when Jesus shared a meal with sinners who were considered unclean, he was showing that something else was more important than piety. When Jesus touched a leper, he was showing his priorities: the leper is more important than the ritual rules against him. When Jesus allowed a hemorrhaging woman to touch him, he was showing that mercy is always more important than a manmade law. I'm reminded of another priest friend of mine who boldly states that hell is not part of God's creation but rather the invention of us so-called "good" people. The "good" people need a place to put all those who are not like themselves (the homeless, the poor, the unsuccessful, gays, single mothers, and so forth).

Piety and religion should never supersede justice, forgiveness, and love. In his letter James put it this way: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world." And we might add: religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: never to hurt another because my piety does not include dirty hands. Never exclude anyone from God's loving embrace because my religion does not include the so-called uncleaned.

Jesus says unambiguously to each and every one of us today: have you come here to worship me with your lips or with your hearts? Give me what you hate, what you fear, out there and in here. I am not afraid of getting dirty. Germs don't scare me. Now sit down at my table, whoever you are. Take. Eat. This is my body given for you.

Paul A. Magnano

Pastor