

Twenty-second Sunday – August 30, 2015

Do you know your markers? Clothes, styles, labels, music, gadgets, social rituals, opinions, and beliefs are important to all of us. They mark our identity. Most groups of human beings have a tendency to be exclusive; they want to know who is on the inside and who is on the outside. So they adopt “identity markers” – visible practices of dress or vocabulary or behavior that serve to separate who is inside the group from who is outside. And nobody wants to be on the outside. We want to be in, to be part of the scene, to be on the right side. So mark well.

The Pharisees in today’s gospel cherish the “markers” that identify them as part of the Jewish community. That’s not necessarily a bad thing. But they are so caught up with the markers of unclean hands, cooking with unclean pots, and, therefore putting unclean food within, they forget the heart. They’ve become so obsessed with external markers, that the heart of the matter is lost or at least badly obscured. “This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me,” Jesus laments.

Since you and I cannot just sit around meditating on God’s laws and regulations, we might take to heart what the Apostle James has to say in the second reading. He writes, “Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves.” And here’s the marker from James that calls out for attention: “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.” So what is more important, cleaning the dishes or cleaning our hearts?

Jesus, the most advanced Spiritual Teacher, claims that the greater danger of uncleanness comes from within us. Evil begins in the human heart, where our hidden motives and intentions lie.

The takeaway from today’s Scripture is this: our best ally in righteous living is self-knowledge. As we become more and more aware of what drives us, we become more free to cooperate or to resist.

Words and rituals and laws and regulations help us to express our faith – but faith begins and grows within our hearts, in those secret places where Jesus marks out a place for us to flourish. So mark well.