

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 22ND. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)
Deuteronomy 4: 1-2, 6-8; Psalm 15; James 1: 17-18, 21b-22, 27; Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23
By *Jude Siciliano*, OP

Dear Preachers:

It is said that there is a spiritual awakening happening these days. It's stirred by the very hectic nature of everyday life and by the bloated excesses of many people having more money (at least in our first world) than they have ever dreamed of having. People are looking for help to replenish their frazzled spirits run ragged by our e-com driven world. All kinds of spiritual interests are being pursued and all kinds of spiritualities are being practiced, from renewed interest in traditional religious practices to eastern and native American religions, New Age practices, etc. Retreat and spirituality centers are filled and have waiting lists. Even airport bookstores, that usually carry business or diversionary reading, now feature books on spirituality. The busy traveler can get help relaxing and learn to meditate while sitting in a middle seat on a six-hour transcontinental flight. Recently, on one of those flights, I had a long conversation with a woman sitting next to me who was reading a book by the Dali Lama. As I write this there are three books on the New York Times best sellers list: *THE SEAT OF THE SOUL*, by Gary Zukav, *A WALK IN THE WOODS*, by Bill Bryson and *TRAVELING MERCIES*, by Ann Lamott. Each book deals with some aspect of faith or provides reflection for quiet moments. (The preacher may want to update this list at the time of the preaching.)

We tend to think of “spirituality” as a practice or pursuit reserved for a very few elitist souls. We think of the lucky ones who have the extra time (and money) to pray more, meditate daily, go to special retreats, or read books on the subject. Most of us would claim our lives are far too busy at this time for “spiritual pursuits.” We try to get to church and say a few extra prayers while we shave or do our hair. But as far as “developing our spiritual lives,” that will have to wait till we get more time; maybe after the kids leave the house, or when we retire.

All this categorizing of the notions of spirituality is unfortunate. We can't reserve spirituality to just some special folk who are able to read the latest books or take time to go to a retreat center. We all have a spiritual life. The question we ask today, in the light of the scriptural readings, concerns the health of our spiritual life. What's the condition of our interior life these days? Is it a deep well from which can draw riches?...does it give us a sense of abundance unrelated to how much we own?...does it awaken the hunger for God in our daily lives? Or, is it

shallow from neglect? Consumed by desires for other than God? Not available to us in times of stress or crisis? If the latter is so, then our spirit is ailing and is not helping us keep our lives integrated, our relationships healthy and ourselves in harmony with the world around us. Our lives are directed or misdirected by the condition of our spirit. Our spiritual life either holds us together or is the cause of chaos and misdirection.

A healthy spirit can make us energetic and vibrant people with a hopeful outlook and a sense of life's possibilities for the good. It can energize us to face the most intractable of social ills and not be discouraged. It can prevent us from giving up when we don't get immediate results. A neglected or bloated spirit causes disintegration, sours how we look at our lives, turns us cynical, leaves us with a narrowness of vision that isolates us from others and keeps us locked into our own narcissism. Without a faith-based spirituality, we soon turn away from trying or, after momentary success, turn back to old ways for lack of fortitude and perseverance.

Why all this concern about spirituality and what has it got to do with today's readings and our preaching? The issue comes up because Jesus confronts the religious leaders who have expressed and based their spirituality on externals. They have taken the revered law of God, about which Moses speaks in the first reading and placed more emphasis on external observances. They are concerned with what is "clean and unclean" (vessels, hands and beds) and they accuse Jesus and his disciples of ignoring the traditions of their ancestors. Earlier (2:23 ff.) Jesus confronted them and underlined the distinction between what is of divine origin and what is of human institutions. Now, in referring to Isaiah, he highlights what prophets have always attacked, the corrupting of religious practices and the oppression of the poor through burdensome religious rules.

The Pharisees and scribes are watching Jesus and his disciples to see if they are observing the ritual rules. John Pilch (THE CULTURAL WORLD OF JESUS) points out that the practices they are speaking of, washing hands, purifying cups, jugs, bottles and beds, are urban practices that could be done by elite city dwellers. Poor people living in the country and travelers like Jesus and his disciples, could never practice these rituals—though they were required to do so. Water just wasn't that available. Peasants had to do the best they could by adapting these rules to their own situation. However, as we see from today's encounter, some religious leaders held them to observe all the purification laws, whether that was

feasible or not. Jesus takes strong exception to the Pharisees, for they hold in special regard their own human designed traditions, but ignore the Law handed down to them from Moses. Like the prophets before him, Jesus comes to the side of the more vulnerable of society and calls all his hearers back to the teaching about God revealed in the Decalogue.

Jesus isn't rejecting all ritual practice but is reminding us that ritual is meaningless if it does not flow from an upright heart. A river of vices flows from a heart that is unclean, "evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, etc." Jesus is only emphasizing what Judaism always taught—an interior purity is the criteria for ritual purity.

The heart. In the biblical view, the heart is the center of our life. It represents far more than the physical organ, it includes the full range of our interior life, the emotional, intellectual, psychic and moral dispositions of a person. From the heart comes all feelings, emotions, needs and passions. It is the source of what determines our personalities and activities. It is also the place of our encounter with God. When God wants to address a person in the bible to cause a life change, or stir up religious fervor, God addresses the heart. The heart is where God gives insight and places a burning desire for God's ways in a person. When God wants to go to go to work on a person, God goes straight to the heart.

The heart then is a figure for the spiritual life of a person. Here can be found a person's deepest truths, most tightly guarded secrets. It is the heart that reveals our true identity. Because the heart is so profoundly identified with the person, so much the seat of one's identity, it is only God who can change a person's heart. (Remember Ezekiel's prayer for a new heart in Ez. 36:26?)

In calling the Pharisees' attention to the state of their heart, Jesus is really engaging them in "soul talk." We take pause and we find ourselves in the conversation. We reflect and ask ourselves—what's within our hearts? The Pharisees and scribes had to have had their hearts provoked by their conversation with Jesus. Whereas they might dismiss him, we his followers cannot. Today we invite God to probe our hearts and enable us, as they say in 12 step programs, to do a "fearless inventory" of the state of our hearts. What is it we really desire in our lives? To what or whom have we dedicated our deepest energies? How alive to God does our heart feel at this moment?

The grace of this gospel today is to awaken our hearts from their slumber and

distractions and stir us to examine the sincerity of our religious observance. Do our lives and our choices reflect the same sensitivity to the poor and disenfranchised as did Jesus'? Or are we using religious customs as an isolation from the world around us? Just as we make efforts to get our bodies in shape after we have neglected them through lack of exercise and poor diet, so too for our "heart" (our spirituality). God has addressed our heart through the Word today. God is the source of its renewal, starting at this Eucharist. But after this gathering, how else will we tend to the renewal of our hearts? Whom else shall we allow to touch our hearts today with their need, longing for love or desire for forgiveness? We certainly don't want to be guilty of what God says through the prophet Isaiah, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts."

QUOTABLE:

Frequently the experience that sets people on the spiritual path seems to come "out of the blue." It is an experience of intense happiness or joy, or unity or love that has much in common with the "mystical" visions described in traditional literature....

The First Noble Truth: For some people, the spiritual journey begins with what may first seem to be a "negative" experience. The Buddha, for example, began his spiritual search in earnest when he realized that all beings were subject to old age, sickness and death. The First Noble Truth of the Buddha is the truth of suffering or unsatisfactoriness. It was only after he had faced this truth in deep meditation that he was led to the discovery of the three other Noble Truths — the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the path leading to the cessation of suffering.

Rick Fields et al. CHOP WOOD CARRY WATER: A GUIDE TO FINDING SPIRITUAL FULFILLMENT IN EVERYDAY LIFE, pages 2, 3.

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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