

Giuseppe excitedly tells his mother he's fallen in love and that he is going to get married. He says, "Just for fun, Mama, I'm going to bring over 3 women and you try and guess which one I'm going to marry." The mother agrees.

The next day, he brings 3 beautiful women into the house, sits them down on the couch and they chat for a while. He then says, "OK, Mama, guess which one am I going to marry?" Mama says immediately, "The one on the right." "That's amazing, Mama. You're right. But how did you know?" "I don't like her."

Today we leave the Bread of Life Discourse in John's gospel, and return to the gospel of Mark. And we find Jesus in a confrontation with people who were trying very, very hard to be good and religious – holy – and to help others do that as well. The problem was that the Pharisees and scribes had a very different understanding of holiness than Jesus did.

For the scribes and Pharisees, holiness was characterized by a decreasing awareness of ambiguity and a growing sense of certitude. For them, the closer you got to God – the more aware you became of your own purity – and of the impurity of others.

For Jesus, on the other hand, holiness was characterized by an increasing awareness of ambiguity and a decreasing sense of certitude. For Him, the closer you got to God, the more aware you become of both the purity AND impurity in yourself and others.

Jesus described this contrast very vividly in His story in Luke's gospel about the Pharisee and the tax collector. We remember the 2 men in the temple, the Pharisee up front praying in sincerity that he was "not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast, I tithe." The tax collector – the GOOD GUY in this story -- was IN THE BACK OF THE CURCH! --I HATE that detail of this story! "The tax collector would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying 'God be merciful to me, a sinner.'" And Jesus said, "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other..." (Lk 18:9-14). For the Pharisees, the closer you get to God, the more conscious you become of your own purity and the more zealously you protect it against the impure.

For Jesus, the closer we get to God the more conscious we become of our own impurity and the more understanding we are of the impurity of others.

Now the painful truth, to which we are all so easily blind, is that, when we hear that story of the Pharisee and the tax collector, we react just like the Pharisee did. We thank God that we are not self-righteous and judgmental like he was but have, instead, achieved a level of humility for which we are grateful and of which we are quite proud. It's like me. I used to be a very proud person, but I got over that, and now I am the best priest in the whole wide world!

That attitude carries over to our certitude that we are right in our theology and politics and that we are right in our views on morality and that we are right about the kinds of clothes that religious people should wear to church and about the kind of discipline that is right for children and about the ways that Mass should be celebrated. And on and on and on. We may have our faults, but being wrong is not one of them!

It feels like something in us is dying when we let that certitude go and acknowledge our pretentiousness and pride and pray with embarrassment, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

For Pharisees, holiness is also characterized by decreasing freedom and increasing bondage to the letter of the law and to tradition, AS THEY UNDERSTOOD IT. For Jesus, holiness is characterized by increasing freedom and decreasing bondage to the letter of the law and to tradition.

The Levitical law required that food offered in the Temple be pure and that the priests who ate the food be clean. So, priests were expected to wash before they ate. In time, this tradition was extended to all Jews. There was nothing wrong with washing before every meal – I highly recommend it! – but for a people who did not have running water in their homes, these regulations were an impossible burden.

So, Jesus and His disciples ignored the tradition, as they did some others. Jesus' position was that, to the extent that a ritual or practice was a means for expressing our inner, spiritual reality, it was fine. When the performance of the ritual or practice became an end in itself and became rigid and inflexible and burdensome, it was to be discarded.

There is something in us, individually and corporately, that feels more secure when we cling to established ways than with emancipation to new and changing ways. Witness the difficulties that some people have had accepting the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. But it's always been this way, as today's gospel reminds us.

Sociologists tell us that it is often difficult for parents not to be able to lay down the law to children once and for all about where they can go and what they can do and what time they must be in. To have to revisit these issues again and again as they grow older is aggravating. But family life is spoiled by too much rigidity just as it is spoiled by too much permissiveness. New times and new circumstances require new rituals, new regulations, new traditions.

Some of us believe that God is best served in this church when we stand for communion. Others insist that we should kneel. Personally, I don't care if you sit, kneel, or stand on your head – I'd just like you to all stay until the end of Mass! Some believe that our contemporary liturgy is an abomination and others love it. Some think we should go back to Latin and some people are ready for Vatican III!

The religious life for Pharisees is characterized by increasing certitude and increasing bondage to the law and tradition.

The religious life of Jesus is characterized by decreasing certitude and decreasing bondage to the law and tradition.

For Pharisees, being holy is characterized by contracting boundaries and by decreasing relatedness to those outside those boundaries.

Being holy for Jesus is characterized by expanding boundaries and increasing relatedness to those outside the boundaries.

Many theologians suggest that the main reason for Jesus' rejection and crucifixion was His refusal to respect the boundaries between respectable people and disreputable people, between right-thinking people and wrong-thinking people. His hands and arms and heart were open to all, tax collectors and sinners, Jew and foreigner, Pharisees, the poor, and rich young rulers.

It's a big difficulty in our own Catholic church, and in all other churches as well. There is something in us as churchgoers to be somewhat pharisaical in our view of reality. We so quickly want to say 'this is right,' and 'that is wrong.' People who do this should be allowed in, people who do that should be excluded. And

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let's be honest – how do we maintain our identity as a community if our boundaries are really porous? How can we maintain clear doctrine if we allow people in who question it? How can we maintain any standards of sexual morality if we speak of compassion and inclusion for all, including the homosexual and the divorced and remarried?

Jesus' answer is that, if we know we are ourselves sinners, we don't worry about associating with other sinners. If we know that our understanding of our faith is always imperfect, then we can listen with compassion to those who question it. If we know our own moral views can be flexed when it suits us, we can show mercy to others who are also struggling. If we recognize that we ourselves have failed then we are not so hard on others who have failed too.

The Catholic Church, the Universal Church, means "They can draw a circle to keep us out, but we will draw a larger circle that takes them all in." Pope Francis is leading us on all of this, as did Jesus. Jesus embraced all. When we are faithful to our Catholic tradition, so do we. Everyone is welcome. It's God's job to do the judging – not ours.

Finally, Pharisaical religion was characterized by a growing sense of God's having a firm hold on God.

Jesus' religion was characterized by a growing sense of God's having a firm hold on us.

Those who are convinced that they have a firm hold on God can talk confidently and, rather presumptuously, about what God likes and dislikes, approves and disapproves.

People who live with the perspective and attitude of Jesus are 180 degrees out of synch with that attitude. They know that God is everywhere, that God is in control everywhere (despite appearances to the contrary), that we live from day to day solely by virtue of God's grace and that our calling is to be God's servants, not God's defenders or orthodoxy police.

The encounter between the Pharisees and Jesus in Mark 7 is a confrontation between 2 very different perspectives on holiness or the religious life.

For the Pharisees, we are a religious person:

1. If we have a growing confidence and pride in our own righteousness.
2. If we have a growing commitment to the letter of the law and to tradition.
3. If we have a growing concern to draw clear boundaries between ourselves and people who do not believe what we do,
4. If we have a growing sense of having a firm grip on God.

For Jesus, we are a religious person:

1. If we have a growing uncertainty and humility about our own righteousness.
2. If we have a growing sense of freedom from the law and tradition
3. If we have a growing concern to expand the boundaries to take in people who are different from us,
4. If we have a growing sense that God has a firm grip on us.

The challenge to every one of us today is to become more aware of how strongly we lean in the direction of the Pharisees and to pray sincerely that God will help us move more faithfully in the direction of Jesus. As someone put it, if we think we are NOT a hypocrite, we probably are. If we think we ARE a hypocrite, then we

probably are not. Let the church say AMEN. (Adapted from Harold McKeithen, in LECTINARY HOMILETICS, Sept 2000, p. 6-8)

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