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Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC
August 28, 2021 22nd Sunday of Year B
Mk 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Has this ever happened to you? You were in the middle of some difficult task or project, and you stopped to ask yourself, "Am I doing this right?" Maybe you were putting together a child's toy or assembling a piece of furniture, but you were uncertain of your own abilities and wished there was someone who could give you some direction, some guidance. This can extend to other areas of life, to parenting, to training a new pet, to preparing for a job interview, to personal finance, to health issues. Today people rush to Youtube to find someone who will give a demonstration of how to get the task done simply and efficiently. A whole new industry has arisen online of people called "influencers." They give the uncertain advice on fashion, relationships, diet, home décor, even how to get rid of some of the "stuff," accumulated over the years. It is part of human nature that people who are unsure of their own abilities want the "experts," those who supposedly have more knowledge or experience, to show the way.

In the time of Jesus there was an approach to religion, a way of life espoused by the Pharisees, that offered people something very much the same--the certainty of "getting it right," in living out one's Jewish faith. They provided the comforting assurance to those who followed their direction that they were part of a privileged group, of being numbered among God's chosen ones. However, the cost of following them could be high, in that one had to surrender one's individuality, spontaneity and creativity to the expertise of those who passed themselves off as the religious "experts." Jesus criticizes the Pharisees because they have distorted the true meaning of religion. He says they have substituted what is trivial for that which is essential. He says, "They teach as dogmas, as eternal truths, what are mere human precepts, just the opinions of certain individuals." He says the Pharisees put words in God's mouth, when it is really human beings who are making all this stuff up. I once saw a T-shirt with a picture of Jesus raising His finger and the words underneath, "I never said that." This same thing happens today.

Jesus says that these same individuals failed to do what is the heart of real religion, the works of justice and compassion. Jesus addresses what is a perennial temptation for organized religion--to substitute some rigorous, but still manageable set of rules and regulations that come with a divine guarantee from the religious "experts," for a more spontaneous, more open, more joyous, and often times more demanding approach to discharging one's religious responsibilities. There is always the

temptation to have these “experts” nail down in advance what one should do, rather than to give the individual some credit for figuring out what he or she might do, could do, should do, in particular circumstances.

Ultimately what it all comes down to is a matter of trust. The Pharisees did not trust their fellow Jews to live rightly, without having them always consult the “experts” on what was right or wrong. But Jesus did trust people, and tried to lead them to trust themselves, a very difficult test for people who had been taught for so long not to trust themselves. Jesus did not teach by laying down a whole set of rules and regulations intended to coerce blind obedience, but instead He taught in parables, little stories that appealed to the imagination. In place of all the rules and regulations the Pharisees had come up with, Jesus gave them just two. First, “Love God with all your heart,” which is to say, “Trust God; trust that the world God made is good despite its pain and sorrow; trust that God does care about you.” And second, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” There is a connection between loving one's neighbor and loving oneself. If you love yourself in the sense of trusting yourself; if you can believe that God believes in you, and trust in the goodness that God has placed within you, then you might be able to trust, to believe more deeply in the goodness in others. It is the person who is suspicious of everyone else's motives who actually believes, who trusts very little in himself or herself.

In conclusion Jesus announces that the path to spiritual wholeness is found by looking within. It is because of our blindness to what is festering in the depths of our hearts, our unwillingness to confront our failures, our compulsions, our illusions and fears, that the whole catalogue of evils Jesus enumerates can come out of us. A Pharisaic approach to religion can serve as an unwitting accomplice to self-delusion, by encouraging its adherents to believe that superficial conduct is all that matters—to be content with just performing the externals and not taking the time to look within. The challenge for us then is to be willing to assume responsibility for our own religious and spiritual lives, and not to be content with a minimalist approach which assumes that because we have fulfilled the obvious, external requirements, we have done all that is needed, all that is required. Let us pray that as we learn to love God more deeply, we may then learn to love and trust ourselves and others more deeply as well.