

August 30, 2009
Lectionary 22b
James 1:17-27; Mark 1:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
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INSIDE OUT

They sell shirts that are inside out. Collar and all. With backwards words that say: “This shirt is inside out.” Maybe the shirt is a way of rebelling against those times that as children we came to breakfast, dressed for school and a parent chided us: Your shirt is inside out!

I’ll say it right away. The problem with religion is that it’s often inside out. It gets things reversed. It gets hung up on the outside, on externals, and forgets what it’s really about. It forgets the inside, the heart of it all. Maybe that’s why so many folks today say they are spiritual but not religious. They’re all for what’s on the inside: the spiritual, warm feelings about love and life and God and heaven. It’s the outer “religious” realities that get in the way: hypocritical people, ritualistic worship, legalistic morals, and hierarchical clergy and structures.

It’s not surprising. Every religious movement begins with the inspiring teachings, energy, and charisma of a leader such as Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, or even Martin Luther! But eventually it becomes institutionalized. Not that that’s all wrong. We need order and structure. But soon things become codified and systematized, doctrinal and dogmatic. Before you know it folks are judging who are the most devout, pure, or authentic followers.

Take a Lutheran example. Martin Luther didn’t like the book of James. He called it a thistle of straw. In a day when folks tried to buy their salvation into heaven, the talk in James about the importance of works seemed “inside out” to Luther. We are saved by grace alone as Paul puts it in Romans. But since then, many Lutherans have made grace a work. You’re simply wrong if you don’t *believe* the right things about grace. Even if you don’t personally experience grace or live the fruits of grace.

Actually James has some very important correctives for us in today’s reading. Be doers of the word and not hearers only. True religion is both inner and outer. Look inward. Look in the mirror first. And watch your tongue before you let loose. Good advice, indeed: be quick to listen and slow to speak. How we could use some of that wisdom. And finally James has a great definition of true religion: how what is inside leads to care for those on the outside—orphans and widows and those most vulnerable among us.

And in the gospel Jesus gets trapped by insiders, the Pharisees, the strict observers of the faith. They don’t like it that Jesus isn’t following some of the external observances that have developed over the years. Pharisees are guardians of the tradition. Not a bad thing. This congregation values tradition as well. We keep the liturgy, the sacraments, the church year, and other customs passed on from generation to generation. What becomes dangerous is when the outer observance becomes more important than the inner reality. And what is even more dangerous is when overly pious people point out the deficiencies of another’s doctrine or practices. How quickly our hypocrisy becomes worse than whatever we smugly criticized in the first place.

When we talk about controversial issues it becomes dangerous when we claim to have the moral high ground. When we are certain that another’s way of interpreting the scriptures or a certain belief is wrong. That we are the true guardians of the tradition. Jesus reminds us that you will know them by their fruits.

And Jesus doesn’t mince words in today’s gospel. You can have the scriptures, creeds, liturgy, and hymns on your lips. You can have all the outward stuff down but if your heart isn’t in it, if your heart isn’t changed, if your religious positions are more important than people, then you’re missing the mark. It’s not a matter of outside in, Jesus says. It’s not what we take in that defiles us (though we can certainly speak of the dangers of excess and addiction). Rather, the problem is inside out. The hurtful words, the negative energy, the harmful actions that flow from us.

If it's all about the inside, the spirituality of things, should we do away with the outside, with religion? Well, I'm wearing the religious clothes, conducting a religious ritual, and am the leader of a religious congregation, so what do you think I'm going to say? As we discuss in new member gatherings here, there are rich gifts in our tradition: the hymns and liturgy and church year, the theology and beliefs, the moral foundations and commitment to justice and care for the poor. You can't really take those things into your being by reading a book. We receive them by participating in a community of faith. By gathering with the people of God each Sunday. Something quite counter-cultural in these individualistic and technological times.

The documentary "Praying with Lior" begins with his mother rocking Lior in her arms while singing Jewish melodies. Both Lior's parents are rabbis but his mother dies of breast cancer when he is young. Lior has Down Syndrome. His name means "light" and he seems to touch everyone he encounters. Yet it is Lior's relationship with God that is uncanny. What Lior loves most is "davening," praying. We see him commune with God outside, in his room and at his synagogue. Several congregation members say that Lior is a genius who lights up a room with his joy and his enthusiasm for prayer.

There are many spiritual and religious themes in this film that I recommend highly (and available through Netflix!) . A multi-faith study guide has wonderful questions about themes of inclusion and disability in Judaism and in faith communities in general. Much of the film chronicles Lior's preparation for his Bar Mitzvah. Your tears will flow as you see him visit the grave of his mother and kiss her tombstone and then weep uncontrollably. And your tears will flow again as you listen to Lior give a speech at his Bar Mitzvah in which he speaks of the importance of faith and community. Just watching the movie confirms a truth deep within those of us who gather week after week in this place: ritual forms us and gives inner meaning to our outer lives through tradition and community.

We may not wear our clothes inside out as a statement of our faith. But our faith is *inside out*, if you will. From our many and varied lives we gather *in* this sacred space. *In* the presence of God. To be moved and touched *in* the deep places of our hearts. Yes, with outer rituals that we hope will form us, but which speak to internal realities. But then we go *out*. To be doers of the word. To joyfully live what our lips have proclaimed.