

August 30, 2009

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8

James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Today's readings have much to say about law. In the Book of Deuteronomy Moses urges his fellow Israelites to follow the commandments God is giving to them, that they might live. This law of Moses was so much more than a list of rules. It was an expression of the living relationship between God and the people of Israel. If the people were to take things away from the law, their relationship would have become something less than a covenant with God. If they were to add to the law—well how can you add anything to God?

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus criticizes some Pharisees and scribes, because for them God's law had become a bunch of dead rules. It's not that the purity laws were bad in and of themselves. It's that they were observed for their own sake and no longer connected the people to God. And they were used to exclude many Jews from full participation in the community. We see the point Jesus was making when he quoted Isaiah. The hearts of the people were far from God, regardless of what they might have said or done. How close are *our* hearts to God?

The author of James refers to the law as well. Although that verse was left out of our second reading, it's worth hearing: "...the one who peers into the perfect law of freedom and perseveres, and is not a hearer who forgets but a doer who

acts, such a one shall be blessed in what he does.” What is James talking about? What is this “perfect law of freedom?”

The “perfect law of freedom” referred initially to the Law of Moses. This law was intended not for restriction and punishment but for liberation and life. How it played out in the history of Israel was a different matter, of course.

The first Christians found the “perfect law of freedom” in the teachings of Jesus, in his “words of eternal life.” The author of John’s Gospel wrote that the word is divine creativity and became flesh in the person of Jesus. This is a far different understanding of “word” than something that sits on a page of a book or on an Internet web site. Even our spoken words are basically static compared to the word which brought the universe into existence. The divine word is dynamic, it’s a word of love, and love implies connection, relationship and growth.

So we have the author of James urging us to “be doers of the word and not hearers only.” Again—the word is not a thing to listen to passively—it’s action, it’s living fully, it’s joining with all creation, not separating ourselves from it.

Peering into “the perfect law of freedom.” Another translation is “looking steadily.” James seems to be saying that we should immerse ourselves in the word. Let it truly be part of us. That’s how we become doers.

We know that many of us are already doers of God’s word, however imperfectly. Earlier this month our parish hosted three families through the Rochester Area Interfaith Hospitality Network. This was the twenty-first time we’ve had RAIHN guests staying with us.

Almost four weeks ago, 100 children in Vacation Bible School acclaimed Jesus as their super hero and saw how they too could become heroes as they met with contemporary “doers of the word” like the Fairport police chief, Fr. Ed, and Bill and Joanne Cala.

Every weekend our parishioners take Holy Communion, the living presence of Jesus, to people who are unable to come to Mass.

And there are folks across the world working hard and risking all to be doers: to bring life and health and peace and love to our planet, demonstrating that the doers of hatred and death do not have the final word on what it means to be human.

There’s always more to be done, of course, although none of us should think we can accomplish it all ourselves. We have to remember that all good giving comes ultimately from God. Our fall parish program, Spirit Acts, is intended to help us become more faithful and loving doers of the word. Notice the title of this program—“Spirit Acts.” “Acts,” brothers and sisters, is a verb!

Amen.