

The Twenty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8
<i>Response</i>	The one who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 15:2-3, 3-4, 4-5
<i>Second Reading</i>	James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The Father willed to give us birth by the word of truth that we may be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

On the Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year B the church resumes her journey through the Gospel of Mark. So if you've been walking with us over the last five Sundays in Ordinary Time, we took a break from the Gospel of Mark to focus on Jesus' famous actions in John 6, his words and his actions in the Bread of Life Discourse. So now the church picks up again in the Gospel of Mark and continues in chapter 7 with one of Jesus' famous exchanges with the Pharisees over the question of human tradition. So this is a very important text. Before I get into it, if you are a Catholic living in the United States and you have any interaction with non-Catholic Christians, you've probably been asked about or wondered about the whole role of Scripture and Tradition. Some people may condemn the things that we as Catholics do as “the traditions of men” and they’ll frequently point to this chapter as a kind of biblical foundation for a negative view of tradition. We’re going to see that Jesus says some negative things about human tradition. So what I want to do now is read the gospel, we’ll try to put it in context, and shed some light on what is going on in this passage from Mark's gospel.

Alright, real quick before I begin, a slight caveat. The lectionary for this week skips several verses from Mark 7. I'm going to let you know when those are skipped because it's somewhat unfortunate they're missing because they actually provide us with Jewish examples of what Jesus means, which might be obscure to us in the Twenty-first Century, but which were really important in the context of

the First Century A.D. So although those parts are in the lectionary, I'm going to include them just so that I can clarify my own comments about the meaning of the passage, but I'll let you know when we get to them which they are. So let's begin with Mark 7:1 and following:

Now when the Pharisees gathered together to him, with some of the scribes, who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands defiled, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they wash their hands, observing the tradition of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they purify themselves; and there are many other traditions which they observe, the washing of cups and pots and vessels of bronze.) And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled?" And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men."¹

Okay, pause there for just a second. At this point the lectionary skips verses 9-13 and it moves straight into verse 14, but I'm going to read the verses that it skips because it gives an example — and I'll come back and explain what it's about in just a moment — that I actually think is helpful for understanding it. So verses 9-13 says this:

And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him surely die'; but you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is Corban' (that is, given to God) -- then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

void the word of God through your tradition which you hand on. And many such things you do."

Alright, keep that in mind, that example, we're going to come back to look at in just a minute. Here is where the lectionary picks up, in verse 14:

And he called the people to him again, and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him."

Alright, and then again at this point the lectionary skips some verses but I'm going to read them to you just to give you the full context. So verses 17-20 is what's skipped. This is what it says:

And when he had entered the house, and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a man from outside cannot defile him, since it enters, not his heart but his stomach, and so passes on?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.)

And here's where the lectionary picks up:

And he said, "What comes out of a man is what defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man."

Alright, so that's the end of the gospel. Okay, there's a lot going on there, that's a long gospel. So it's another example of the fact that although Mark has fewer episodes in his gospel, when he gives episodes that occur in Matthew and Luke he frequently gives more detail, they're longer. So this same episode occurs in Matthew 15 but it's much more brief. So let's walk through it together in detail.

First, the Pharisees' hand-washing. The story begins here with a conflict over the fact that the disciples aren't washing their hands before they eat their meals. Now this isn't just a question of hygiene, right, there is something more going on here and Mark, unlike Matthew, cues you into what that is. So when Matthew mentions the hand-washing in his gospel, he leaves it unexplained because he's writing for a Jewish audience, he's writing for a Jewish Christian audience who would be familiar with the Pharisaic custom of hand-washing. But Mark, who in all likelihood is writing for Christians in Rome, probably predominantly a Gentile audience, has to stop and explain this custom to his audience with a kind of aside to make sure they understand what's going on. So what he says here is that the Pharisees and the Jews don't eat unless they wash their hands in observance of "the tradition of the elders," right. So the Greek word here for tradition is *paradosis*, it literally means something handed on, right. And in this case the tradition of the elders meant a tradition of the Pharisaic elders.

So who are the Pharisees? They were a sect within Judaism, they were a group within Judaism that made one of their goals to live according to the holiness of the Temple in their daily lives. So think about it for just a minute, if you go back to the Old Testament, there are laws of ritual washings that you would have to follow if you were going to go into the Temple in order to worship. Numbers 9, for example, talks about some of these ritual washings. Jews before they would go into the Temple would wash in a bath called a *Mikveh*. They would go down into the water, they would cleanse themselves, and then they would enter into the Temple to celebrate Passover or one of the feasts or offer sacrifice. What the Pharisees did was different. They not only practiced the washings before entering into God's presence in the Temple, they, in a sense, brought the holiness into the Temple into all of their daily life so that before they would even eat a meal they would wash their hands in a ritual act of purification. Now the Bible nowhere commands such an act, right, it's not in the Jewish Scriptures, but it was part of the tradition of the elders of the Pharisaic sect, of that sect of Judaism. Now the Pharisaic sect was the most popular Jewish movement in the First Century A.D. There were other Jewish movements like the Sadducees and the Essenes, that are tied to the Dead Sea Scrolls, but the majority of Jewish people, if they followed anyone of these groups at all, followed the ways of the Pharisees, okay. They were very prominent in the synagogues throughout the holy land. So what Mark is doing is just letting you

know that what's happening here is most Jewish people follow the Pharisees' practice of washing hands but the Pharisees here notice that Jesus' disciples aren't doing it, right, they're not keeping that custom. So they're offended by it and they're kind of scandalized by it and they ask him a question, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled [meaning unwashed]?"

Jesus fires right back at them with a quote from the Book of Isaiah. He says to them that Isaiah spoke about you hypocrites and he basically condemned in advance, he spoke prophetically, about these Pharisees. He says, in the Book of Isaiah that, "the people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain they worship me, teaching as doctrine things that are just the precepts of men." Okay, so what is that talking about? Well here Jesus is setting up a contrast between doctrine, in Greek *didaskalia*, meaning teaching that comes directly from God, and the precepts of men, the Greek word there is *entalma*, but the important point is it's a precept of men, in other words, things that just originate with human authority and not with God's authority. Then Jesus says something so important here. He says, "you leave the commandment of God and hold fast to the tradition of men." Okay, what is going on there, what's he talking about? Well it's a little unfortunate here that the lectionary cuts out the example that Jesus uses because in isolation it can sound like he is condemning all tradition, but that's not what he's doing. The key line there is you abandon the commandment of God for the tradition of men. In other words, you're coming up with traditions that not only supplement the word of God but actually undercut the word of God and make it where you don't have to follow the word of God.

In the omitted section from the lectionary this week Jesus gives an example, it's the example of Corban. What was Corban? Corban was an Aramaic word that means dedicated to God, and what some Pharisees were doing is they were taking property and possessions and they were declaring it dedicated to God, consecrated to the Temple. In other words, they would set these things apart for the Temple in order to get out of having to use that money or use those possessions to support their own parents, okay. So it was a way of basically avoiding of having to take care of your parents in their old age or provide for their means. So Jesus here sets it up, he says Moses told you to honor your father and mother but some of you are

taking money that you should be using to take care of your aging parents and you're calling it holy and dedicated to the Temple (i.e. Corban). What does he say then? You use this tradition of men to avoid keeping the commandment of God and he says, and you do many such things. So that's the key there. What he's saying here is, he's giving us a window into the fact that there were some Pharisees in the First Century A.D. who are using some of these traditions, like the Corban tradition, to avoid keeping the commandments like honor your father and mother, it's the fourth commandment which came directly from God, through Moses, to the people of Israel. It's written with the finger of God in Exodus 31. So Jesus' point in context here is not, and this is really important, it's not that all traditions are bad, it's that human traditions that undercut or contradict the word of God have no place in the people of God, and that's what some of these Pharisees have developed, these human traditions that are used to avoid keeping the commandments.

Alright, so once that example is in place now Jesus calls the disciples to them and he gives them a riddle. He says listen to me, there's nothing outside of a man that by going in can defile him, but it's what comes out of a man is what defiles him. Now again in principle that makes sense but the lectionary here skips over the verses where Jesus gives the disciples an example, because he pulls them aside and he says let me explain what this means to you, and he uses it and he applies it to the issue of unclean foods. He's trying to help them see that it's not whatever food you eat, whether you are eating with washed hands or unwashed hands, that's not what actually defiles a person; it's not what goes into him because it just passes through the body. What actually defiles a person is what comes out of the heart. It's sin that defiles a person in the final analysis, and in that verse Mark has another aside, he says, thus he declared all foods clean. We're going to see this play out in the early church that one of the big divergences between the early church and those Jews who continue to follow the Mosaic law is over the question of clean and unclean foods. You'll get into that in the Book of Acts when Peter has the vision and God reveals to him that all foods have been made clean and all peoples have been made clean. But Jesus is already planting the seed, so to speak, of that teaching in this passage in Mark.

In any case, Jesus ends the teaching with a very important statement which the lectionary does keep, this is kind of the climax, when he says from within, out of

the heart of man, come all these evil things. Alright, so what's he getting at here? What Jesus is showing here is the primacy or the priority of moral defilement over physical defilement, or even ritual defilement, the cultic defilement of ritual cleansing entering into the Temple. What he's saying is what ultimately matters is the interior defilement that comes from the wickedness of the human heart. You'll see this elsewhere in the gospels where Jesus will lambaste the Pharisees because some of them are acting in a hypocritical way. They're paying their tithes, they're making sure they wash their hands, but inside they're full of dead man's bones and they're doing unclean things like committing adultery or breaking the Ten Commandments. So it doesn't make sense to break the 10 Commandments given directly by God but keep the tradition of the elders of washing your hands before you eat. That ends up making you a hypocrite, right, because you're doing the external gestures of piety and fidelity to God but you're failing on the essentials of obeying the Decalogue, obeying the Ten Commandments. And, sure enough that's kind of the theme that links all of these sins together.

If you want to walk through them, I'll take you through each one of them, and you can see many of them, most of them, are tied in one way or another to the Decalogue, to the Ten Commandments. So let's just walk through each one of them. And if you'll forgive me, I'm going to get a little technical here. I'm going to give you some Greek words, because they matter, to help illuminate exactly what Jesus means here, because some of the English translations are a little misleading or a little weak and you have to be careful here about exactly what he's talking about, or at least you have to be clear about what he's saying. So let's look at these defilements. What is it that actually matters? What is it that actually defiles a person? What is it that comes out of the human heart? Jesus makes a list.

First, he says evil thoughts. Now pause here. The Greek word is *dialogismos*, we get the English word dialogue from that, right. Now this might trouble you because you think, oh gosh I can think of lots of involuntary evil thoughts that I've had. Are those all defiling me? Well the Greek here is a little clearer. *Dialogismos* in Greek doesn't mean like an involuntary thought, something that just passes through your mind uncontrollably or quickly. We all have involuntary thoughts, it's how the brain works, but in Greek *dialogismos* means evil plans or evil designs, right. So this is something that is voluntary and it's being deliberated, okay, and we can all

think about what that might mean, an evil plan to hurt someone else or an evil plan to be unfaithful to a spouse, that's the idea that he's getting at here. Evil designs, evil plans, that's the first thing.

The second word he uses here is fornication, or the New American Bible has unchastity. The Greek word there is *porneia*. You know what English word comes from that, pornography or porn, right. So *porneia* is a catchall Greek word that refers to any type of illicit sexual activity, any type of illicit sexual act outside of the marital covenant, okay. So this is a very important term. Some Bibles will translate this just as immorality, and that does not do it justice because extortion and theft are immorality but they're not *porneia*. *Porneia* is specifically with regard to sexual immorality of any kind. That would refer to fornication, homosexual acts, prostitution, anything along those lines would be considered *porneia*. Which by the way, quick aside, you'll frequently hear it said today that Jesus never said anything about homosexuality or homosexual actions and that's actually not true. Although he never explicitly singles out homosexual actions as wrong, when he says *porneia* in a First Century Jewish context that would include all sexual acts outside of the marital covenant, including homosexual actions. So Jesus here is very clear that any illicit sexual action is evil, including homosexual actions, so it's not actually true that he never addresses the question. In Mark 7, he explicitly addresses it and he calls it evil.

Theft, what is that related to? Well obviously that's the seventh commandment, that one's easy. Murder is related to the fifth commandment. Adultery is a specific type of sexual transgression because it's even more grave because it violates the marital covenant. So this is someone who is married having relations outside of the marital covenant. That's an explicit transgression of the sixth commandment. Then we have coveting or avarice, this one's a little tricky. In Greek the word is *pleonexia*. *Pleon* means full, or like abundance, so *pleonexia*, it's tricky, it could be translated as covetousness. The New American Bible calls it greed. I think avarice might be the best translation, right. This is a disordered desire for wealth or for abundance, right, for being rich. That is an evil thought that comes out of the human heart. So the next word here in the Revised Standard Version is wickedness; the New American Bible translates this as malice. The Greek word *ponēria*, it sounds like *porneia* but it's not the same thing, just means anything that's very evil, grave evil,

ill intentioned actions. Deceit, obviously is a breaking of the seventh commandment against bearing false witness. Licentiousness is an interesting word here. We don't use that in English much these days, but the Greek word literally means perversion. In other words, anything gravely depraved, right, depraved actions. I won't give you examples, I'm sure you can think of some. Then, this one's interesting, Jesus also lists envy as being evil. Now envy is a disordered desire to possess what someone else has, but the Greek word here is interesting, it isn't actually the word envy. Literally it says *ophthalmos ponēros*, the evil eye, the evil eye. Now that could mean two different things. In ancient times as well as in some European cultures today, the evil eye is a kind of curse. If you wish harm on someone or you put a curse on them, you give them the evil eye. But it can also mean the evil eye of envy. In other words, I see something that someone else has and I want to possess it, so I want to take it from them, so I murder them or whatever I might do to try to get it. Either one of those interpretations is possible here, but Jesus says that the evil eye is obviously an evil thing. That's a defilement that comes from the human heart. If it is talking about envy then obviously it would be a transgression of the ninth and tenth commandments, right, coveting something that belongs to someone else.

Then the next one listed there is slander, right. Again, the Greek word here is a little broader than that. The Greek word is *blasphēmia*, you know what English word we get from *blasphēmia*, blasphemy. So blasphemy is polyvalent, it has multiple meanings. It can mean blasphemy against God, right, taking the Lord's name in vain, but it can also mean saying something scandalous or libelous against another human being. Most interpreters think here Jesus means the latter, so that's why they translate it as slander, because if you look in context, the commandments Jesus is focusing on in this list are on the second tablet. In other words, he's primarily focusing on sins against other human beings and within human relationships. He's not talking about the Sabbath for example, or idolatry, or that kind of thing so most scholars think that this is referring to blasphemy against others. Like for example, if you were to pronounce a curse against the Jewish High Priest, in the Old Testament that's considered a kind of blasphemy, right, which can be punished out of disrespect or dishonoring the high priest. So for example, in the Book of Acts some people say Stephen was blaspheming against Moses by saying we were going to change the laws and destroy the Temple, so it's just a kind of

example there of how *blasphēmia* can have a broader context. And next, pride, this one's interesting. *Hyperēphania* is the Greek word. *Hupér* means like super or abundant, so you can kind of translate this as super arrogance, right. Maybe you know somebody who is not just prideful but super arrogant. Jesus lists that also as something evil, a disordered self-love. And then finally, the last one here, foolishness. Now you might be thinking, well come on Jesus, is foolishness, you know, is that evil? I mean we all like a good laugh every now and then, some of us like to be silly. The Greek word here is not silliness, in the way that we mean it in English. The Greek word is *aphrosynē*, which literally means imprudence. It's kind of like the psalm that says the fool says there is no God. A foolish person is someone who doesn't use reason, who acts in ways that are out of accordance with reason, who does imprudent things that lead to people getting hurt, right. Think of someone who, I mean this is just a contemporary example but, you're texting while you're driving, that's imprudent and it's putting other people's lives in danger. So Jesus is here saying *aphrosynē*, imprudence is something evil, it comes from within the human heart, it defiles us. We're supposed to use our reason, right. People often engage in imprudent acts when they are drunk or when they're under the influence of drugs, right. They do things that are irrational. That's the kind of thing Jesus is pointing at here. He's not just talking about kids being silly or something like that, or humor, he's talking about imprudence as a lack of virtue. That is what defiles a man.

So Jesus says all these evil things — and notice these are all not just unfortunate or you know undesirable — Jesus says they're evil. Evil plans, sexual immorality, adultery, blasphemy, slandering other people, acting imprudently, these are the things we should be focused on according to Jesus. These are the things that actually come out of our hearts, the seed of our will, and defile us, make us unclean. Not “washing” or “not washing” with unclean hands before we eat a meal. This is the real heart of the matter, literally, and Jesus is trying to drive the law of God into the heart of human beings. That's where he really wants it to reside because he knows that's where our decision for or against God and for or against our neighbor, that's where they really take place. It's not just the hands, it's in the heart.

Okay, that was a lot. What about the Old Testament readings? Well thankfully in this case there's not a lot to say about the Old Testament readings. Let's read it and then we'll see what the connection here is. So the Old Testament for today is Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8, and this is what it says. Context, Moses is addressing the Israelites on the plains of Moab before they enter the promise land right before Moses dies. Deuteronomy is like his last will and testament and this is what he says to them:

"And now, O Israel, give heed to the statutes and the ordinances which I teach you, and do them; that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, gives you. You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it; that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.

Then it skips down to verse six:

Keep them and do them; for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law which I set before you this day?

Okay, so what is the church doing? Why did she pick this reading? I think the key line there is "you shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God..." In other words, don't add anything to this law that is going to make you unable to keep the law. That's really the heart of what Jesus is saying. Some of these traditions the Pharisees had added actually are contradicting the law of God. Moses is saying don't add to it and don't take anything away from it that you might keep these laws that the Lord himself has given to you. What are the laws he's referring to? Well it's the Ten Commandments, right, because Moses is going to reiterate the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy, in the Book of Deuteronomy, for that second-

generation of Israelites. So I think that's the link there between the Old Testament and the New.

Now, the question this immediately is going to raise for a lot of Catholics is, wait, well is Moses or is Jesus here laying out some kind of principle of *sola scriptura*, where we should go by the Bible alone and not by any tradition at all? Is Jesus condemning all tradition or just some traditions? And if so, which traditions is he condemning and which is he approving? Now it would take us a really long time to lay out a full exposition of the relationship between Scripture and Tradition here, but just a couple of elements here to help you answer the question in a brief way. Number one, we know from context that Jesus is not condemning all tradition because he himself elsewhere in the gospels commands his disciples to keep certain traditions. So for example in Matthew 23, I think this probably is the most helpful passage, in Matthew 23:1 Jesus says to the disciples:

The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice.

So for example, Jesus commands, in this case this is striking, he tells the disciples to follow the teachings of the Pharisees and scribes when they sit on Moses' seat. That means when they speak authoritatively from Moses, when they teach and interpret the Torah of Moses, but don't do what they do because they preach but they don't practice. So don't be hypocrites like them. So Jesus has a respect for Jewish tradition. He himself is going to follow it when they go down to the Temple to celebrate the Passover, for example, and he celebrates Passover with a glass of wine, right, a cup of wine. There's no mention of wine in the Old Testament for celebrating the Passover, it was part of Jewish tradition, but Jesus keeps that. So there are certain traditions that he exhorts the apostles to keep, but there are other traditions that undermine the commandments of God, like the Corban tradition, and those he says he rejects. Or other traditions which, like the washing of hands, which are neither here nor there, they don't matter at the end of the day because they don't get to the heart of the matter. Scholars use the word *adiaphora* for that, they are incidentals, you can give them or you can take them, you can take them or leave them. Paul will say this in his letters to Romans for example.

But then there are certain traditions which are binding. And so again we interpret, whenever we look at a passage in the Bible, we interpret it in context and in 2 Thessalonians 2:15, Paul says to the Christians, “stand firm and hold fast to the traditions,” *paradosis*, same word Jesus uses, “which you have heard from us, whether by word of mouth or by letter.” So St. Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, elsewhere in the New Testament says we actually do have to keep the traditions, whether they’re written or they’re oral, as long as they’re from the apostles. So apostolic tradition has to be kept. So in essence, what's going on here is we need to make the distinction between a tradition of men which contradicts the word of God, Jesus condemns that, and an apostolic tradition which is guided by the Holy Spirit and given to the church as binding, whether in written or oral form. Those traditions we have to keep, right. Now you might think okay, well, how am I supposed to know which traditions are apostolic and which ones are man-made? Which ones are permanent and binding and which ones can be changed, or can be dispensed with? Well you know that by the living authority of the church herself. The reason Christ institutes a church with leaders like the apostles, Peter and James and John, is so that the living authorities, the apostles and their successors, can discern through the Holy Spirit what elements of Sacred Tradition are permanent and binding and what aspects of Christian life and worship are customs, or little “T” traditions, that can come and go.

So the best statement I know of this is from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. If you have the Catechism you can look at paragraph 83, a nice distinction, I’ll quote it now:

And [Holy] *Tradition* transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit... *Tradition* is to be distinguished from the various theological, disciplinary, liturgical, or devotional *traditions*, born in the local churches over time. These are the particular forms, adapted to different places and times, in which *the great Tradition* is expressed. In the light of Tradition, these

traditions can be retained, modified or even abandoned under the guidance of the Church's magisterium.²

Magisterium there refers to the teaching authority of the apostles which they have from Christ. So as Catholics, in closing, we believe that there are two kinds of tradition. Big "T" Tradition, apostolic Tradition, and little "T" traditions, customs and disciplines, that arise in various churches over time. The living authority of the church is the one who helps us to discern which are permanent and unchangeable and which are in fact dispensable over time. So I hope that helps you get a little bit of a grasp on what Jesus has to say to us about human tradition.

² CCC 83; cf. 2 Thess 2:15