

Twenty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time: Religion, Being Tied to God

In today's first reading, from *Deuteronomy* Moses teaches the people to recognize the great gift they have received, the Law of God. It might seem strange to us to consider this a gift, but to the Hebrew people the law demonstrated God's love for them. They knew what they had to do to be His people. They knew that God was close to them. They had experienced His Power whenever they called upon Him. He had led them out of Egypt. He had given them water and food in the desert. He had defeated the Egyptians and would go on to defeat their other enemies. The Law tied them to God. This was their religion. The word religion comes from the Latin word *ligare* which means to be tied to something or someone.

The Pharisees were determined followers of the Law. But, instead of using the law as the way to honor God, they used it as a way to attack others. Some Pharisees declared that common every day people could not possibly follow all the statutes of God and thus would be condemned. They constructed guard rails around the law, additional laws to prevent the law from being broken. For example, the third commandment, Keep Holy the Sabbath, had the guard rail around it that no work could be permitted on the Sabbath. Around this were additional guard rails defining work; so taking more than forty steps to a well for water would be work. These guard rails became the traditional way of life for the Hebrew. Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah:

This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts.

What then is religion? How should people be tied to God. In today's second reading, *The Letter of James* answers this question: *Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

The orphans and widows had no one to care for them. They were vulnerable. Pure religion cares for those who are vulnerable.

Who, then, are the vulnerable in our society? Who are the people that have no one to care for them? Widows and orphans, certainly, but there are so many more people who are vulnerable. Those who are physically or mentally challenged are vulnerable. If we are determined to be religious, then we need to care for these people. We need to establish hospitals for the sick, treatment centers for those who are mentally challenged. Did you know that the Roman Catholic Church is the largest non-government provider of health care services in the world? It has around 18,000 clinics, 16,000 homes for the elderly and those with special needs, and 5,500 hospitals, with 65 percent of them located in developing countries. The Roman Catholic Church is religious.

Who else are the vulnerable in our society? Children. They are being preyed upon by the porn industry. The Church has been determined to fight this blight to save

our children. The Church is religious. Children need protection. They trust their parents, their teachers and all who have authority over them to keep them safe while at the same time helping them reach their potential. The History of Catholic Education in the United States extends from the early colonial era in Louisiana and Maryland to the parochial school system set up in most parishes in the 19th century, to hundreds of colleges, all down to the present. The Roman Catholic Church is religious.

Who else are the vulnerable of our society? Those who secular society has placed on its fringes. People who are struggling with their gender identity, people who are forced to leave their homelands to support their families, people who cannot work and are thus homeless, and many, many more are all vulnerable. The Catholic Church has continued to reach out to all these people. The Catholic Church is religious.

Do you and I recognize the vulnerable around us? Do we see those who need our help and respond to their needs, or do we just put them out of our minds? Are we religious? Are we tied to God?

A great blessing of my many years as a pastor is witnessing so many parishioners reaching out to those with needs. Anytime I have asked people to care for others, there has been an overwhelming outpouring of time, talent and treasure. You respond because you are religious. You are tied to God.

At the end of today's gospel, Jesus speaks about those things that defile a person. He lists the negatives within the hearts of sinful people. The Lord also recognizes the opposite, those things within a person that lead him or her closer to God. For within a person there are truth, beauty and love. Within a person there is the determination to live for God. All these are really gifts of grace planted within a person by the Lord. They show their presence when that person is generous, truthful, kind, empathetic, and wise, to name a few virtues. When we treasure that which is within us, the very presence of God, we cannot help but serve His presence in others.

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The symbol of the Christian is the Cross. The cross is both a reminder of the sacrificial gift of the Lord and a call to join the Lord in the unique and only true love that exists, sacrificial love. By reaching out to others, by sacrificing ourselves for others, we take steps out of our selves and leap into the Love of God.

Religion is not difficult. All that is required of us is for us to take a close look at our interior attitudes and then let our external actions be a reflection of whom we are, followers of Jesus Christ, religious people, people tied to God.