Spirituality
Scripture for Life
Columns
Spirituality



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A cartoon I saw recently depicted a woman saying, "My desire to remain well-informed is currently at odds with my desire to remain sane." Her sentiment may be shared by many today who find it hard to deal with all that's happening in politics, AI, wars, climate, and on and on.

Desire. It can sound like a dangerous word. While our puritanical culture often hears it with sexual connotations, St. Ignatius of Loyola made the discovery of our deepest desires a key part of his Spiritual Exercises. That's also what Jesus was talking about when he reproached the Pharisees for performing ritual practices that maintained an aloof avoidance of involvement with their hearts.

Today's readings each touch the theme of the heart.

First, Moses tells the people to hear what he has to say so that they might remain close to God. As they are about to enter into the Promised Land, he reminds them that God alone is the source of all that they have and are. Recognizing that is what will make them a wise people, as Isaiah will say, a light to the nations.

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 1, 2024

Deuteronomy: 4:1-2, 6-8
Psalm 15
James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

The books of Exodus and Deuteronomy give us diverse renditions of the law of Moses. This indicates that, in spite of what today's text seems to say about changing nothing, the essence of the law is not in regulations but in the relationships the law fosters among the people and between them and their God.

The people who seek to know and follow God's will are the ones who will be "wise and intelligent." As today's psalm says, they think the truth in their heart, which means that their intellect and emotions will lead them to the reverence that expresses an appreciation of the meaning of law, far beyond the letter.

St. James develops Moses' idea as he encourages his community to allow God's word to continually bring them to life.

Their relationship with God begins with God's initiative, like a seed planted within them. God planted the seed, now they need to cultivate it, rejecting the temptation to delude themselves by thinking that they know God when they don't live as ambassadors of God's love.

Interacting with his critics, Jesus dubbed them "hypocrites." The word comes from Greek theater, where the actors masked themselves, pretending to be the character they were playing. That's normal in a play. Jesus saw his critics play-acting, masking themselves with legalism and rituals rather than living faith in God.

The word *religion* connotes a relationship, a binding of one to another. The legalists had bound themselves to ideas, to particular practices rather than to God and neighbor. They put on a very good act, but their hearts were comfortably disengaged.

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When Jesus went on to talk about what was truly impure, he mentioned not one single infringement of ritual laws. Instead, he gave his listeners a list of actions that harm others, behaviors that defile the perpetrator even as they denigrate others. He knew that it's a lot easier to wash one's hands or follow the rubrics than it is to live in reverence for all of God's creation. He also demonstrated which of those two options brings joy.

Jesus minces no words in his reproach. He challenges all of us who hear him to stop deluding ourselves by accepting compliance with regulations as a substitute for the kind of relationship with God that frees us to act out of love and nothing else.

What does this say to the woman who sees herself trapped by seemingly mutually exclusive desires? St. Basil the Great taught that love for God cannot be taught any more than people need to be taught to enjoy the light or life. Rather, we are created with an interior longing for love and the source of love. When we are deeply aware, we know that love is our deepest desire.

Jesus didn't convert many of his adversaries. Although he invited everyone to explore the depths and the meaning of their humanity, most didn't take him up on it, and those who did were by and large outsiders: social outcasts and disciples rejected for having faith in him.

Finding and following our deepest desires will free us to follow the Lord, who was called insane and a lawbreaker — but was never accused of failing to love.

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