

Homily  
22OrdB  
August 29, 2015  
St. Bernard Church

Our Gospel today is about hypocrisy, about the Pharisees not truly living up to their faith in God, but instead overemphasizing their extremely detailed traditions.

We all realize, I think, that we also don't live up to our Christian faith all the time, and that we need to be honest and admit we're not perfect Christians.

However, there's more to this Gospel than that.

3 times Jesus refers in the Gospel to the human traditions of the Pharisees.

Of course, the Pharisees have to be held accountable for putting excessive priority on all these human traditions.

However, if we stop and think about it, it's very unlikely that the Pharisees Jesus was talking to invented this practice.

It's more likely that the overemphasis on these traditions was passed on to them by their parents and by their mentors, the people that trained them. They were probably just living out their Jewish faith the way they had seen it lived by others who were part of their lives.

So let's call the way the Pharisees lived out their faith their tradition. They had a picture, so to speak, of how to be a Jew, that was their tradition, and that's how they practiced their Judaism.

This raises the question for each one of us this evening: What is our tradition? What is our picture, our model, so to speak, of how the Catholic faith is lived out?

My guess is that most of us are living out our Catholic faith based upon what we've seen around us during our lives, what our parents did, what our peers did, what the people around us did, whoever they might be. That's our personal tradition.

This raises another question: Is our personal tradition, our picture of how we should be Catholic, is it adequate?

A friend of mine, a Catholic man I knew when I lived in upstate New York, moved to another parish and was asked by the pastor there to help start a ministry for men in the parish. My friend sent me an email and told me he was having quite a bit of difficulty getting men in the parish to focus on religion. He said there were basically 3 problems.

First of all, he said, most of the men thought of themselves as nice, decent guys who were living a good enough life to get into heaven.

Secondly, they didn't like all the teachings and the rules in the Catholic Church. They wanted more room for individual choices.

Third, they didn't see any need to be able to explain any aspect of the Catholic faith to others.

These men were comfortable and complacent with their tradition, with their picture of how the Catholic faith should be lived.

So what do you think? Is this ok? Is this an adequate way to live out our Catholic faith?

Well, what's the standard? What should we use to measure how we're doing? What's really expected of us?

Here is a quote from St. Peter in the first chapter of his First Letter:

“Like obedient children, do not act in compliance with the desires of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in every aspect of your conduct, for it is written, ‘Be holy because I am holy.’”

St. Paul says, “Blessed be God...who chose us before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him.”

St. James says basically the same thing: “Let perseverance be perfect, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

According to the Bible, then, our goal should be Christian perfection. We should always be striving to get closer and closer to perfect holiness. We should never be satisfied. We should never feel like we've made it, like we can stop growing in our faith.

Here's another way to look at this.

Twice in today's Gospel, Jesus refers to people's hearts. The first time, quoting from Isaiah, Jesus says, “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”

So one way of measuring our personal tradition, our picture of how we should live out our Catholic faith, is to ask this question: What's in my heart? If our heart determines our eternal destiny, what's in my heart?

Does my heart burn with a love for Jesus? Am I passionate about my relationship with Jesus?

In his last conversation with Peter before He ascended into heaven, Jesus asked Peter 3 times, "Do you love me?"

If Jesus were standing before each one of us, just him and us, with no one else around, and He looked right into our eyes, and He asked us if we loved Him, what would we say, if we were completely honest?

If you're like me, your response might be, "I want to love you more. I want to love you better. Show me how."

I want to close with this passage from St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians:

"This is my prayer: that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception, to discern what is of value, so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ."