

Mark 7:14-15
James 1:17-27
August 29, 2021

The Inner Life

One of the popular religious designations nowadays involves the phrase, “spiritual but not religious.” It is popular among “millennials” and largely means that they have a private religious life, if you will, but do not involve themselves with organized religion.

According to one analyst, these spiritual but not religious types have three beliefs that seem to characterize most if not all of them; they do not believe that science or materialism explains fully what it means to be a human being, they believe that meaning is at least in part, if not largely, associated with the inner life, and they are, obviously, not interested in institutional religion.

To be honest, one is not hard pressed to sympathize with them. The Christian Faith in its institutional forms has a long and sometimes sordid history, and even presently is involved in some absurdities that tempt one to abandon the project of giving organizational structure to the community side of our faith.

I am more hopeful and less cynical more realistic about organized things, given the chaos and disorder without them, so respectfully depart with them on this point. Certainly I would agree that the sciences, and the humanities, as helpful as they are (I advocate them) are limited in their scope and ability to give complete answers to life’s mysterious qualities.

I also share their affinity for the concept of the inner life. I hope to focus our attention on this idea of the for a few moments on this Holy Day. Before I do that I want to comment on a line from the text in James;

From James, “Every good and perfect gift comes from above . . . from the father of the heavenly lights . . . (James 1:17)

This idea is actually found throughout the Bible although never perhaps stated as clearly as it is here. Perhaps the refrain from the Psalms helps, “The Lord is good, God’s love endures forever,” which expresses the intrinsic relationship between God and Goodness. It is a part of one of the prayers we pray at mealtime.

The idea in its most extreme form is found in the Calvinist idea of Total Depravity, which says that human beings are not capable of doing, telling or even thinking anything good, without God’s help. Negatively, this doctrine is offensive because it insists that everyone is evil and not capable of goodness. It is often rejected or watered-down on the basis of this objection.

On the other hand, positively, this doctrine offers an interesting perspective. Look around, do you see anything good? Are there people helping, serving, blessing, behaving in kindness, compassion, and empathy? Are there noble sacrifices made? Is there any beauty or loveliness? Calvinism has made a spiritual discipline out of looking for sin in our lives.

Perhaps we ought to make a discipline also out of looking for the good.

My questions are rhetorical, the answer is yes. If every good comes *from God*, the only conclusion one can draw is that we spend our lives swimming in a sea of God's grace, which is all around us and in us. That brings me to the notion of the inner life.

We also read from Mark, "Nothing outside a person can make that person "unclean," by going in. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that makes that person unclean." (Mark 7:15)

By inner, it is meant that the seat of meaning is either the heart or the mind or the stomach, images that conjure up the dimension of depth, and recognize that in addition to the body, people are also characterized by emotion, thought and ideas, and moral considerations. We recognize this identity as being "in" us.

The person that each of us is, is expressed in speech and action. Attention must be given to the demands of the inner life as well as the outer, material side of our bodily existence.

It is hard to put one's finger on this facet of life but surely it is in the context of an inner life that the words of Jesus make any sense; that the material food we consume nourishes the body, but ultimately not the soul.

It was all about washing hands before dinner. His disciples had been criticized for failing to wash their hands before they ate. It was not about hygiene but ritual purity. They did not know about microbiology, germs and viruses and bacteria, and were not concerned about them.

To wash one's hands before the sacred act of taking in life sustaining food, was supposed to mean that one had not done anything with one's hands while procuring the food, that one might be embarrassed to confess before God, bring into God's presence. It was not about clean hands, but acceptable work, acceptable living. Was anyone harmed, was the food stolen, was anyone's well-being disregarded?

But for Jesus it was also not about ritual, but the meaning behind the ritual. It was less about the work than the person, less about what a person had done, and more about who they were, because it is out of the substance of who one is that comes speech and action.

When a religious ritual helps remind us of these deeper truths, then it is good, when it is just a thing done, it has no value. Truth is, if we examined ourselves this way before each meal, we would conclude that we were never "clean" by our actions, but also, never without God's grace.

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