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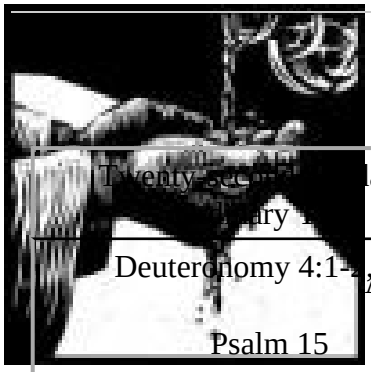
Looking into the mirror

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Sep. 2, 2012 Spiritual Reflections

Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55) was fond of describing the Sunday encounter with the sacred texts as looking into a mirror: ?The first requirement is that you must not look at the mirror, but must look in the mirror and see yourself in God?s word. Then, while reading God?s word, you must incessantly say to yourself: ?It is I to whom the word is speaking? ? (*Provocations*, The Plough Publishing House, 1999).



Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8

Psalm 15

James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

At times, it is pleasant to gaze into the mirror of the word and to hear assurances like: ?I love you; you are mine.? ?Fear not, I am with you.? ?Come eat, drink, rest in me.? However, there are other times when the word, with its truth, is so challenging that we are tempted to turn away. Today is one of those days.

The Marcan Jesus today confronts those whose piety is comprised of pride in their own accomplishments and whose purity is only skin-deep. But as we hear this Gospel, we are not to look at these Pharisees and scribes in the story, but at ourselves. It is to us that the words speak; it is to us that the term ?hypocrite? applies.

Etymologically, the term hypocrite is derived from the Greek hypocrites, which means ?an actor,? ?a dissembler,? ?someone with skills at displaying a counterfeit persona.? This term comes to life in us whenever we say one thing and do another, or when our words are not truthfully translated into our deeds. In today?s second reading, James says that those who welcome God?s word as a gift and nurture its truth will find the grace and the strength to overcome the dichotomy between word and deed that results in hypocrisy.

In a speech attributed to Moses, the Deuteronomist (first reading) urges believers to take the statutes and decrees of God as their norm and guide. These are a source of life; to embrace God?s word, with its demands for truth, justice, mercy and fidelity, is to live authentically. God?s word permits no hypocrisy or dissembling. Those who live by it are to guard against cultivating a counterfeit persona.

Thomas Merton once referred to such falseness as a sort of ?pseudo-goodness? that prefers routine duty to courage and creativity (*Contemplative Prayer*, Random House, 1969). A person of such character is content with established procedures and safe formulas while turning a blind eye toward the greatest sins of injustice and greed. Such are the routines of piety (hand washing, avoidance of the unclean) that sacrifice all else to preserve

the comfort and security of the past. For the pseudo-good, for the hypocrite, for the counterfeit persona, meditation becomes a factory for alibis instead of a place to struggle with the flaws in our authenticity. Pseudo-goodness shirks the exigencies of the present with platitudes that were minted in the last century. At times, it also fabricates condemnations and denunciations of those who are willing to risk new ideas and new solutions.

This pseudo-goodness Merton described was rampant in Jesus? day, particularly among some of those who offered themselves as models of legal observance. When Jesus held their actions to the light, they bristled against the truth of his words and ridiculed his actions. When we hear this story, we are to look into the mirror of the word and allow it to reveal the authenticity, or not, of our own goodness. If we welcome the truth, we see God?s word has the power to transform us from within, where all goodness and holiness begins. Believers are then responsible for translating their inner goodness into good deeds and good words that serve the needs of others.

Each time the community gathers to encounter Christ and one another in the Eucharist, their commitment to truth and goodness is renewed. As we hear the words ?Go in peace to love and serve the Lord and one another,? it becomes our responsibility to mirror to the world all that we have experienced. Loved, we are to love; forgiven, we are to forgive; fed, we are to feed; clothed with grace and security, we are to clothe and shelter the needy. To do otherwise is to distort the one whose image we are to reflect.

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