

05 September 2021: James 2:1-17, Mark 7:24-37 (Proper 18)

Communion or disunity is the theme in today's reading from James; more subtly in the Gospel and Psalm. How timely: there are manifest conflicts in the Church and divisions in our nation. Fear is named as the source; so too prejudice, racism, sexism, and other "–isms." Identifying root causes is worthwhile, since it is impossible to address what is unnamed. However, we can become so enthused with diagnosing problems that we never move on to solutions. We can get stuck in analysis paralysis. Merely talking about problems and solutions gets us nowhere. Perhaps you've heard the saying, "When all is said and done, usually more is said than done?"

I think a fundamental issue—whether in Church or society—centers on moral vision. First, a word about the other moral vision that is the dominant, but inherently flawed morality. This is the "morality of the minimum," as determined by like-minded individuals. Minimalist morality defines goodness as avoiding mutually agreed upon offenses. The question is not 'what is good and how am I to live it?' but 'how do I avoid the unacceptable? If I avoid these agreed-upon wrongs, then I can live the rest of my life as I choose.' As an example, someone may condemn others for racism, but not give a second thought to hedging on their taxes. In case you don't believe such a thing is immoral for us, see Romans 13:6-7! Both racism and tax fraud are immoral; it does not 'work' to concentrate on one while ignoring the other.

There is no such thing as minimum morality in Christianity. There is no minimum anything in Christianity: no minimum for prayer, worship, study, works of mercy or anything else and the reason is very simple.

For Christians morality is founded on the ideal of complete self-giving, proposed to all Christians whatever their state in life, in all relationships and contexts, regardless of personal sacrifice, suffering, persecution or even martyrdom. The priority is union with God, lived now in anticipation of the joy of complete union with God and all humanity in the age to come. Christians are Christo-centric; that is, Christ at and in the center of our lives. Our unfolding vocation is to see with the eyes of Christ, hear with Christ's ears, be Christ's hands, feet, mouth, and heart; to be Christ for others: charitable, loving, forgiving, gentle and kind, yet, as Christ himself, ferocious with injustice, exploitation, and suffering however manifested. In this moral vision all relationships and every context are occasions to know and make known Christ, opportunities to live union with God and others.

Christians witness to divine love in all relationships and situations: charity is not mere social service, the Gospel not a message about human fraternity. We "lift up our hearts" proclaiming the primacy of God and the joy of God's will for all humanity. What is needed now are people who spend themselves in adoring God, immersed in the mystery of the Holy Trinity, graciously living the absolute claim of God for every encounter with life as it is. This kind of traditional morality is not dreamy idealism: as St. Paul and St. James illustrate repeatedly in their letters, Christian morality is always realistic, always practical—that is, about what we *do* in our relationships and environments, motivated by and wishing to make explicit our joy in the Lord, the presence of Christ in us and through us. As an example: honoring all persons—regardless of race, ethnicity, status, gender, orientation, personality quirks or other realities should be a no-brainer for Christians because we believe God desires no one be lost, oppressed, or discarded. We make real God's desire for everyone in our lives. We believe that God blesses us and makes us blessings for others because God yearns to draw all creation back into his own eternal Being in ecstatic love.

We will fail in living our ideals, we will need confession and repentance. We will want to amend our lives, taught by the Holy Spirit new ways 'to live and move and have our being' in God. However, we cannot confess and repent, we cannot seek to make amends and, with God's help, practice a more excellent way of thinking, speaking, and acting if there is no ideal that is truly beyond us, that is higher, better, and more demanding than our own momentary desires and comforts; a morality beyond a mutually agreed upon social contract. Lives that are not centered on doing the minimum, but intent on growing up to the measure of the stature of fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13). We are to progress in faith and an active life of giving ourselves that we become of maximum service to God and others. We are to be a people for whom sacrifice for God's glory is our fulfillment, our joy. This is how we are to live. Amen.