



Aging Well
James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (August 29, 2021)

“The devil made me do it.” Or, another version of that: “This is not me.” Along with a neighbor’s testimony: “That is so unlike him.” And “She is such a nice person; I had no idea she would do that.” We have heard a variation of these explanations before. And indeed, when something really tragic happens and investigative reporters probe a crime suspect’s neighbors, we often hear puzzlement at the absurdity of the incongruence between what has happened and a person’s public reputation.

Sometimes we remain really confused at our own choices and behavior. It’s not only teenagers who reply to the question, “Why did you do that?” with “I don’t know.” Husbands know that question all too well, also. And truly at times it is hard to tell.

How do the environment, the culture, the experiences we go through, a simple lack of knowledge, the grievances we carry around but try to suppress, the fear of our vulnerability, of being taken advantage of, the fear of being invisible, of not mattering, of being discounted, the fear of being excluded – how does all that create bias, blind spots, and prejudices that play into our insecurity, reactivity, and automatic responses that often generate unwanted suffering in ourselves and others?

In today’s gospel, Jesus explains where evil comes from. It comes from within all those people who really annoy you. But, let’s be honest, it doesn’t come always or only from within others. It also comes from within you. And from within me, too. Blaming others, or, more childishly, the devil distracts us from our responsibility to grow and diverts our attention from our own propensity to rebel and hurt ourselves and others.

Jesus replies to the Pharisees’ cynical question: “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” (Mk 7:5) with a rather harsh and unexpected put down. They were merely reacting to the fact that Jesus’ followers had not washed their hands before eating. Now, hand washing prior to eating a meal is an excellent sanitary precaution and habit. In fact, doctors keep telling us that is not the only time we should wash our hands but should do it well and often during the day to avoid the spread of bacterial infections.

Jesus’ response was not a reaction to the reaction. He wasn’t embarrassed because his disciples showed poor hygiene. He wasn’t concerned that their behavior reflected poorly on him. Hand and food washing are not his main concern. He wasn’t even showing disrespect for the elderly who had come up and promoted traditions that were intended for faith support and development.

Jesus was concerned with hypocrisy. Why sweat the little stuff when the heart is unbridled? Jesus was not concerned with a mindless observance of the law. The law was given in the first place to restrain evil but now the letter of the law had become more important of the spirit of the law. As Jesus and the prophets before him noticed, observance of the law did not make one a “good” person. Evil can easily hide behind our “good” façade. Evil can easily dwell very deep in us. Tradition per se is good. It’s what we do with tradition to justify our evil motives that is bad.

Why worry about the details of the law when the intention is to use the law to your own advantage? Why pretend you are a law-abiding citizen only when it's convenient to you?

Zen master, Thich Nhat Hanh,¹ is known for explaining that both good seeds and bad seeds reside in us and then he asks: "Which ones are you going to water?"

Evil intentions, Jesus stresses, come from within, from the heart. Jesus is aware that when Moses instructed the people of Israel to observe the law diligently, he was talking about the legitimate teachings that, if understood and embraced, would bring one closer to God. Jesus, in fact, has not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it. (Matthew 5:17) How hypocritical it is to put up a good show and pretend to be a religious person while having damaging desires and hateful thoughts about our neighbor in our heart. Can we claim to have always had pure, ethical, generous, and kind thoughts about everybody? Are we clear of prejudices and bias? Can we honestly say that we do not hold angry thoughts about people and groups of people we disagree with?

What Jesus seems to say is, "Please, stop pretending to be religious. You are not fooling anyone but yourself. Stop using religion to judge others. People can tell when you are not being honest and authentic, but you are rather presenting yourself as the golden standard for pious living. The world doesn't know what to do with a Church that talks a good talk. What the world needs is a Church that practices what she preaches: a vulnerable Church, generous and centered on Christ.

Jesus does say that evil intentions come from inside the human heart, but great things come from there also. People are capable of great compassion and sacrificial generosity; when moved with empathy we advocate for those unjustly targeted, we do not limit ourselves to land a voice for the voiceless, we make sure that the voiceless gain a voice, that those deprived have their rights restored.

The true Church is the servant Church that kneels in humble service of those in need. The Church welcomes in strangers, heals souls, feeds the hungry, and shelters those who seek refuge. But she is not limited to all that. The true Church also advocates and speaks up for justice and becomes an ally to the abused and the excluded. If the incarnation of the Word of God in Jesus means that God has chosen to come closer to us and walk side by side with us in this lonesome valley, then our application of God's will for us is to become companions on the journey with one another and especially with the most vulnerable and despised.

If it is true (and it is) that we are created in the image and likeness of God, then both our character and our actions ought to reflect God. Being created a Child of God means that we suggest a resemblance of God. To be an image of God means that when God looks at us God sees Godself reflected in us. God goes beyond the social categories by which we define and judge one another: gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, class, education, party affiliation, age, ability, and so on.

God is able to see the true us better than we ourselves can. And when we seek the face of God and in contemplation are granted a glimpse of God, then we also have a glimpse of our true self, our best self. God mirrors back who we truly are. That's a great mystery. What we are called to do then is act accordingly.

¹ [The Life Story of Thich Nhat Hanh | Plum Village](#)

The more we stare into that divine mirror the more we have a better sense of our divine being and our calling to maturity, to shed what is childish and let the mature Christ in us manifest himself.² That's what it means to let our light shine. That's also what acting our age means in our Christian parlance. Christian discipleship or, in other words, following Jesus means living boldly his message and trusting him in our daily death and resurrection to our truer self. That is the application of the Paschal Mystery to our lives.

So, what do you see when you look into the mirror? What message do you expect back? Are you in love with your self-created image or are you ready to hear the truth about your God-intended self?

Surely, a mirror reflects back what is already there and does not lie. We can readily see features that do not fit social standards and expectations. Do we feel pressured to change not only our physical image but our social image as well so that we become more acceptable and likable? What is important to us? Whose standards are we following?

Is it possible for a Christian to live by the Word and at the same time to conform to the death-dealing ways of the world?³ Well, yes, it is possible, for many do show knowledge of the things of God. But is it wise? Do people act on their knowledge? Do I apply wisely always and everywhere the knowledge of the Lord's way?

It's evident that there is a gap between "knowledge" and "wisdom" that needs to be filled. It's also evident that humility and fear of the Lord aid us in taking an honest look at ourselves and agree that we have a lot of growing in Christ to do. So, in a way, when we make our choices and display certain behaviors, we act according to the maturity we have achieved in Christ: we do show our "age." We may still be childish in the faith, or we may be further advanced in a Christ-like age. And an honest look into the mirror of God may easily show to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear that there is room for growth. When in the morning I pray: "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done..." I pray that I may contribute to laying the ground for God's Kingdom to come and for me to be open to God's saving will.

God may be done with us in terms of salvation through the cross of Christ, but God is still working with us through the Spirit in existential terms, in our every-day journey towards justice, in our being conformed to the divine design for a more equitable world.

Let's go deeper in our spiritual life, deeper than just following traditions, deeper than routines and lip service, deeper than pretending and good shows. Let's shed superficiality and hypocrisy in search of the true image of God in us so that we may freely express it, enjoy it, and relax in it. Let us look at ourselves in the mirror of God and not forget what a Child of God looks like. Amen.

² Ephesians 4:13

³ Romans 12:2,9; 2 Corinthians 4:2; Philippians 2:21; 1 John 2:15-17; 1 John 5:19.