

“The Enemy Within Us”

In the name of our risen Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

Recently I heard a story. I don't think it is true. And it's a good thing it isn't. It's about a cranky old professor who had a cranky old dog. During the warmer months he kept the dog at home, where it could spend at least part of the time outdoors. But when winter came he put the dog in a kennel because the animal went stir crazy inside, chewing things and ruining the carpets. While the dog was away, the professor was worse than ever, snipping at his family and ordering them around. When the dog returned home in the spring, things improved. The old man started kicking the dog again and stopped taking his ire out on everyone else.

It is an awful story, but everyone knows deep down inside how nice it is to have a scapegoat – someone you can blame for all the things you do not want to blame yourself for, someone who will carry your dark side for you so that you do not have to carry it yourself. That is why it is so helpful to keep an enemy or two on hand. As long as you can despise someone else for her meanness or his crookedness, you do not have to own up to any of those things in yourself. The target stays out there, where you can keep shouting at it, which keeps your mind off the target inside you, buried way back among all those other things stored in the garage of your heart.

Often, when we are reading the Bible, Pharisees and scribes, those guys we read about in today's gospel, perform this function for us. They make great targets. They are the nit-picking legalists who reject Jesus' teaching because he keeps breaking their rules. They are the holier-than-thou hypocrites who would rather be right than redeemed. Scripture helps us with these stereo-types by calling them blind guides, white washed tombs, snakes, a brood of vipers – all because they refused to believe the good news that their rules and righteousness were no longer necessary and that they could trade all that in on a whole-hearted relationship with Jesus, also known as the Christ.

The scribes and the Pharisees did not buy it. They had been following their rules a long time – both the written Torah, given to them directly by Moses, and the oral Torah, developed by faithful rabbis over hundreds of years. Between the two sets of laws, every aspect of human life on earth was set under God's will. There was nothing – not the least exchange between two people, not the simplest of meals – that was not covered by the laws. Everything that could be done could be done in a holy way, and no one was more devoted to living that holiness than the Pharisees.

They were lay people, not priests, but they adopted priestly standards for themselves. They observed the Sabbath reverently. They tithed everything, right down to the spices they put in their food. They ate every meal in a state of purity equal to that of the priests eating in the temple, because their homes were their temples and they cut themselves no slack.

So while we may criticize them sometimes for rejecting our good news of Jesus Christ, they were not bad people. On the contrary, they were some of the best people around – serious about their faith, concerned and devoted to pleasing God by living the most honourable lives they knew how. Chances are that every one of us have a Pharisee somewhere on our personal list of saints. Take away the label and maybe you can remember that person – someone whose obedience to God seemed as natural as air, although you know now how hard it must have been. Someone whose quiet, steady virtue was like, a light on a foggy night for you. Just seeing it helped you find your way. If that person could do it, so could you. That person raised the standard of what was possible for you, simply by the way he or she lived.

That is how it was with the Pharisees. They kept to very high standards, which would have been all right if that had helped them stay in communion with other people, but it tended to work the other way around, by cutting them off. Fully two thirds of the oral Torah was about eating – what you could and could not eat, with whom, on what kind of dishes, out of what kind of pots. Some of the concerns were practical. Hands were silverware in the ancient world and you did not want to share your casserole with someone who had just come in from mucking out the stables, not unless he washed first.

More of the concerns were spiritual, however. Purity was a theological category as well as hygienic one. Physical impurity was seen as a sign of a moral impurity, so that dirty hands pointed to a dirty heart. Touching a corpse, or a leper, or a pig got you banished from the Lord's table. You had to go through the process of purification before you could come back again, because for the Pharisees contagion was everywhere – not just physical germs but spiritual ones too. The world was dirty. Sinners were dirty, and all that dirt was dangerous, not only to people's bodies but also to their souls. So purity laws were set up to protect true believers from contagion.

That is why the Pharisees were so appalled when Jesus' disciples dug into their lunch without washing their hands first. It was not just bad manners. It was bad faith. They were ignoring the laws God had set up for their health. They were defying the tradition of the elders, although there is no evidence they were doing it on purpose. Jesus was an educated Jew. His followers were not. They were his students – former fishermen, day labourers, civil servants – not a Pharisee among them. They had not adopted priestly standards for themselves. Jesus had never encouraged them to.

Jesus was quite careless about the purity laws, as a matter of fact. In the short time they had been with him, they had already watched him lay hands on a leper and a dead child, send a bunch of pigs over a cliff, sit down to supper with a house full of sinners and violate the Sabbath's laws without a moment's remorse. He did not seem to care about such things. He harped on other things instead. Forgiveness, self-sacrifice, the power of love.

So when the Pharisees criticized his disciples, Jesus let into them. Stop kicking the dog, he said, and go look in the mirror. You are so careful about how you live, and what you eat, and the company you keep, but none of that will keep you safe. The danger is not outside of you, waiting to creep into you through your mouth. It is already inside of you, in your own heart. If you want to be pure, start there, with yourself, instead of blaming the dirt on everyone else.

We do not have overt purity laws anymore, so I guess you could call today's gospel reading an outdated story, but we do not seem to have lost our appetite for scapegoats. Do you remember the two movies, "Philadelphia" and "Schindler's List" both of which won an Oscar? In both of them, certain groups of people are declared unclean – people with AIDS in one, Jews in the other. They are both excluded from the ranks of humanity, shunned by people who consider themselves clean. If they can just get rid of the defective people, the clean people think, then the world will be a safer place for their own children. If they can just avoid contact with them, then they will not get sick themselves.

I will never forget one scene from Schindler's List, in which the Nazi commandant Amon Goeth has fallen in love with Helen Hirsch, his Jewish maid. One night he goes down to the cellar where she lives – ostensibly to thank her for her hard work – but before long he is circling her while she stands there speechless, dressed in nothing but her white slip. "I understand that, strictly speaking you are not a human being," he says to her. "You are a Jewish vermin, I know, but I ask you," he says, reaching out to touch her face and then yanking his hand back as if he had been stung, "are those the eyes of a rodent? Are those the lips of a rodent? Is that the hair of a rodent?"

In his own insane way, he is struggling with his purity law. He is a high-ranking member of a superior race. She is the enemy, the germ that threatens to bring his race down, or so he thinks. And yet he loves

her. And yet he cannot love her, not without contaminating himself, so he beats her instead, wrecking a cellar and her face at the same time. Who is the rodent here?

Friends, it is such an important thing that Jesus knows about us and it is hard for us to hear him. The danger is not out here, in the part of us that wants to cut ourselves off from them. There is actual evil in the world, no doubt about it, but until we meet up with the evil in ourselves, we cannot do battle. We cannot fight the shadow we will not own.

Mother Teresa knew it. Someone asked her why she did what she did and she replied that she engaged in her ministry of love because she knew there was a Hitler inside of her.

My brothers and sisters, does that shock you? It does not shock Jesus. He knows the full potential of our hearts for good and evil. He just wishes we knew it too. Meanwhile, he volunteers himself to everyone who still needs a scapegoat. I will take the blame, he says, you can give it to me. Give me what you hate, what you fear, out there and in here. I am not afraid of getting dirty. Germs don't scare me. Now sit down at my table, whoever you are. Take. Eat. This is my body, given for you. AMEN.