

Father Dave's Homily

09/02/12 22 B

-- I've always been someone who has believed that, when I come to Church, I should be dressed neatly and clean. For instance, when I've been on vacation and have gone to Mass, I've always worn long, reasonably dressy pants with a decent shirt.

-- But when I visited the mission our diocese had for 20 years or so in Zimbabwe, I realized that there are more important things than dressing nicely or having clean hands. Many of those people did not have the facilities for washing and were unable to don their Sunday best.

-- But they worshipped with enthusiasm. And they took care of each other. When the priest would come into their village they would share what little they had with them (even remember taking a live chicken back to the mission center).

-- The Law of Moses prescribed ritual washing of hands before eating certain sacred meals. The practice of these ritual washings eventually carried over to more ordinary meals among the "religious" class of Jesus' time. And they tended to be the wealthier people of the day.

-- Many of the common people, those who lived in rural areas, didn't have the luxury of readily-available running water and the other things required for these ritual washings. Like the people from the Zimbabwe missions, they couldn't depend on the things we might take for granted.

-- It's good to understand this background as we encounter Jesus confronting certain scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem. Jesus wasn't one to ignore the Jewish Law. But he understood that customs that became associated with the Law were not so essential.

-- Sure, his disciples may not have observed all the traditions like ritual washings. They probably weren't able to in many circumstances. But Jesus knew there were more important things than those traditions.

-- In the Catholic Church, we have always distinguished between capital-T Tradition and the small-t traditions. The first are the basic elements of our faith, which we must hold firm. The second includes

many practices (often spiritual practices) which can be helpful to many people but are not essential.

-- Yet some groups of Catholics fall into a similar trap that the men Jesus encountered fell into. Devotions based on one or another private revelation, for example, can become more important for them than our basic faith in Jesus Christ.

-- The Letter of James offers a helpful corrective to these types of attitudes. We will continue to read from this letter for several more weeks. First, we must remember that all gifts come from the Father in heaven. We do not earn our way to God's love.

-- But we also have to respond to God's word and God's gifts to us by sharing with those who have little. In their day the widow and the orphan represented those people, for they had no one to fall back upon for the basic needs of life.

-- In my experience, the young Christian communities in Zimbabwe took that message to heart. Though many of them had very little, they tried as best they could to look after those who were in the worst need.

-- We, as the Catholic Christian community of the Wauseon area, are called to do the same. We would do well to imitate their example by the manner in which we care for those in need around us.

-- Then, our own traditions of life and worship will be much more meaningful.