

## Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8; James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27; and Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Indisputably, modern humans are challenged daily with newness in every aspect of life. In response, we tend to cling to the familiar as to a life raft in a stormy sea. Sometimes our resistance to change can be so strong we become militant about our life rafts. What is the appropriate way to handle the new when all we know is the old? Let me give two examples of current conundrums.

Within the past fifty years, new attitudes have made room for gays and lesbians in mainstream America. The Catholic Church also has affirmed the dignity of people in the LGBTQ community and Pope Francis supports their right to public unions with all the social privileges that includes. However, many dioceses are still encouraging “curing” gays and few parishes sponsor LGBTQ support groups. We need a great deal of official work to be able to see LGBTQ people as made in the image and likeness of God.

Also for the past fifty years, the American Catholic Church has fought hard to end legalized abortion. One weapon has been to deny communion to Catholic politicians. Currently the national council of bishops, the USCCB, is discussing whether it should issue such a denial for President Biden solely because he supports abortion rights and in spite of his efforts to weave the rest of Catholic social teaching into government policy. At stake are how we understand Eucharist – a reward for the worthy or pure gift for the sinner – and whether we see abortion as a higher priority than other injustices.

What does the gospel propose as we struggle with newness? Jesus makes two points: first, do not use overly scrupulous behaviors as a benchmark of holiness; and secondly, holiness (a.k.a. cleanliness) is determined by what is in our hearts and can be read by our moral behaviors, not our religious ones. Mark tells this story as Jesus is entering the land of the Gentiles where Jesus will do for them everything he did for the Jews. No thing, no place and no one is beyond the love of God. Mark’s audience needed to hear this and so do we. We also respond to what is new by labeling it “less than” what we know. God however sees the value in both the old and the new.

Yes, but the Torah commands rejecting many people. Sorting out how to deal with newness has never been easy for humans. What’s more, Scripture contains many human interpretations of God’s will and so contains plenty that is sinful. We are stuck, as the Pharisees were, trying to figure out our direction.

In Dt 4, Moses exhorts the Israelites to observe carefully the commandments. Careful observance will result in *hokmah* and *binah*. Biblical scholar Elizabeth Nagel explains that *hokmah* or 'wisdom begins with fear of or respect for the Lord and the conviction that [God] is always present and active in daily life. Consequently, *hokmah* results... by engaging reality and pondering what God is doing with it. Wisdom is grounded in what is real and is often practical."<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, *binah*, which can be translated as understanding or intelligence, “results from a serious process of discernment [which] begins with questioning appearances and challenging personal assumptions and opinions. *Binah* presumes that one cannot immediately and completely grasp what God is doing in any situation – much less know how God is using circumstances to fulfill long-range divine plans. Intelligent people do not speak and act as if they were God.”<sup>2</sup> Wisdom and understanding respond to newness by humbly watching God at work.

Yes, but how are we supposed to act? Jas 1 tells us, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world,” which in the context of this letter means not giving more honor to the rich than the needy. This is what Jesus is busy doing on both sides of the Sea of Galilee. He heals, he feeds, he sets people free and he welcomes everyone. If no one is beyond the love of God, no one should be beyond our love either. May Jesus’ humble, compassionate concern be our guide as we face the newness of each day!

- ❖ Which issues or new situations in the modern world tend to overwhelm you?
- ❖ How can you respond to these with humility and compassionate concern?

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<sup>1</sup> *Workbook for Lectors, Gospel Readers and Proclaimers of the Word: US Edition 2021*. LTP, 248.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*