

## Ordinary 22B - 2021

### **"Oh yes, I believe in God, but I'm not nuts about Him"**

A young coed being interviewed on television about her religious beliefs said, "Oh yes, I believe in God, but I'm not nuts about Him!" According to the Gallup Poll that is a good description of how most Americans feel about God. Ninety-four percent of us believe in God. When it comes to translating that belief into action, however, most of us are clearly not nuts about Him.

We have something in common with the Pharisees. Jesus once summed up the Pharisees' chief problem like this: *"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."* —

There is a group kin to the traditionalists that we might call Christian Secularists. This group is made up of that host of nominally committed people who fill the rolls of most churches. They bring their children to Sunday School. They use the Church to marry and bury. They visit us at Christmas and at Easter. They are not atheists or agnostics. They, like that young coed, believe in God, but they're not nuts about him. Today's Gospel is Christ's view about such followers. Fr. Tony (<http://frtonyshomilies.com/>).

In Exodus 30.17-21, Moses is told to set up a wash basin for the priests to use before going into the presence of God, including when they are going to make an animal offering to the Lord on behalf of the people. They washed in recognition and as an expression of the holiness of God (as in, humans are not holy compared to God, the always holy one). To put it briefly, **priestly ritual cleansing related to food was about marking and communicating the holiness, purity, and oneness of God** more than it was about anything else.

Eventually, someone somewhere decided that if it was good for priests to do, it would be good for everyone to do, and a new tradition was born (yes—there is a moment in time when a tradition is NOT). And see how the tradition, shaped by human hands and hearts, becomes about us rather than about God?

The Pharisees' question reveals their focus: they aren't angry that God's holiness is being violated, they are insulted that "these people" aren't setting themselves apart from "those people" as is "our custom." Instead of God's

purity, the tradition of the elders made the **ritual cleansing be about separating themselves from others, about their own purity compared to others**. True, a definition of holiness is "to be set apart," but God's intent with this and other purity laws had taken on a whole new life and meaning through the "tradition of the elders."

By Jesus' words, we see how our human traditions, whether we mean them to or not, can lead us **very far from the will of God**. What was once about the purity of God has become about something entirely different—about making **ourselves feel better compared to someone else**, so Jesus steps in to reorient us back to himself.

On a more "local" level, I remember this one Sunday at church when a young child talked quite loudly through the entire worship service. Afterwards, I met an irate, long-standing member in the church office. A leader in the church at the time, the man revealed with his angry words how many people probably view that sacred Sunday hour: he was angry that his "nice time with his friends" was interrupted; he yelled about how he came to church to be with his friends and how this kid ruined it.

He wasn't mad because he thought God had been disrespected, he was mad because he didn't get to feel the way worship usually makes him feel.

**That's what a human tradition and ritual is all about, isn't it, making us feel a certain way about ourselves?** In the case of the Pharisees and scribes, **it made them feel set apart from non-Jewish people**.

But in the course of setting up a way to get that feeling, separating from others became central to the task—and that willingness and acting to separate **reveals an interior immorality**, a broken heart in need of Christ's mending. (Center for excellence in preaching - Chelsey Harmon)