

Homily – September 1st, 2024 – 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time



We have all heard sayings or proverbs that seem to contradict each other. For example you've heard, "Don't put all your eggs in the one basket." Maybe it was your financial advisor telling you to diversify

your investments so that if one area of the economy crashes you won't lose all your hard-earned savings. But you've also heard, "Don't spread yourself too thin." So, which one of these two are true? Here's another one. You've all heard, "Practice makes perfect," which is true. But, this is also true: "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." Which one of those sayings is more true than the other one? Or, how about these two sayings: "Too many cooks spoil the broth," which is true, versus, "Many hands make light work," which is also true. Which one of these two contradictory statements should we run with and apply to our lives?

The answer to the question about which of these two seemingly contradictory sayings is more true is that they are both true. If my name was Dr. Phil instead of Fr. Phil, and your marriage—despite all efforts to keep it alive—was all but over, I might be tempted to say to you, "There are plenty of fish in the sea." But if you were just going through a rough patch, like every couple goes through, I might be tempted to say, "The grass isn't always greener on the other side of the fence." Both those sayings are true, but both need discernment. That's the key.

From a Christian view point, discernment is the ability to make good, sound judgments after we have brought our questions to God in prayer. It's not simply weighing "pros" and "cons" on a scale and seeing which one carries

the most weight. In prayerful discernment you might hear God say to you, “The best things in life are free, so be appreciative of all that I have given you.” Or, depending on the circumstances, you may discern the voice of God saying, “There’s no such a thing as a free lunch, so don’t be lazy and work hard.” Discernment is never about praying to God with the answer already in mind.

There is an apparent contradiction between the 1st reading, which is the Word of God, and the gospel, which is also the Word of God. In the first reading, Moses has just led the Hebrews through the desert for 40 years, and now they are on the cusp of entering the Promised Land. Moses reminds the people to keep the Lord’s commandments as this will guide them in this new land that God is about to give them. They are to give heed to all the statutes and ordinance that God had given them, and they are to observe them diligently. Nothing is to be added or taken away from the commandment of the Lord. That sounds pretty clear to me: follow the law, follow it to the letter, and you will gain God’s favor!

Then comes Jesus in the gospel where he rebukes the Pharisees for following the law to the letter. They have completely missed the “spirit” of the law in favor of the “letter” of the law. They think, by following all the rules laid down by their religion, they can somehow earn salvation. (There are lots of Catholics who still think that way). Salvation, for Jesus, is never anything we can earn through our own effort or by following the “correct” rituals. Salvation comes by way of God’s grace and by our cooperating with that grace. To put it as St. James put it in that second reading, **“Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers of the word.”** In living your Christian faith, your hands and your feet (doers) are more important than your ears and your mouth (hearers). Jesus accused the Pharisees, and the Pharisee in each of us, of **“abandoning the commandment of God and holding to mere human tradition.”**

Jesus has great respect for his own Jewish Tradition, but he knows when to let it go if it’s not giving life to people. People, especially suffering people, are of ultimate concern for Jesus. That’s why he told us that the law was made for

people, not people for the law. What's wrong with the Law? In, and of itself, there is nothing wrong with the Law. However, when adherence to the Law takes on a life of its own, you can be sure your relationship with God is on the verge of getting ousted in favor of a really good report card. You will have dislodged faithfulness for blind obedience. Salvation doesn't depend on adherence to laws. Laws cannot change our hearts. Rituals, in and of themselves, cannot change our hearts either. Only cooperating with God's grace can.

So many of us are guilty of majoring on what is minor. We give importance to what is of no great concern and then convince ourselves that our salvation depends on it. Or, we minor on what is major. In that case, we pay lip service to the gospel message. I've always found that 10 Hail Mary's are so much easier to do than giving my time to someone in need. That's my way of keeping the cups, pots, and bronze kettles well buffed.

Here's a parable about how each of us and, by extension, the Church can minor on what is major and major on what is minor. Again, I draw on Fr. Richard Rohr for this story.

There is a story that an artesian well had sprung up in the middle of the desert, and it was a marvelous well with clear, nourishing, and copious water. People began to come and to drink and to celebrate their wonderful discovery of a well in the desert.

Gradually they built a building over the well. They walled it off. They developed ceremonies to celebrate their good fortune of finding an oasis in the desert. They wrote official versions of how it was discovered. They spun fantastic tales about the effects of the water. But the water, actually, over the next few months, had ceased to flow.

But hardly anyone noticed that the water wasn't flowing anymore, that it begun to diminish and finally it went away. They were so busy building and

maintaining the super structure. The water took itself over and burrowed a new channel in the desert, which was just as good, clear and nourishing and life-giving in a totally new and unexpected place. A new group of people found it there and they were also refreshed. But the old group of people just kept telling the story back at the old well, kept maintaining the wall, kept maintaining the building over the well, and actually forgot to realize that the water wasn't there anymore. (Fr. Richard Rohr's talk entitled Fire from Heaven)

How will we know if we are pursuing real water or just maintaining a structure? How will we know if we are to “look before we leap” or “strike while the iron is hot”? How will we know if we are majoring on something minor or minoring on something major? How will we know if we have abandoned the commandment of God in favor of mere human tradition? Discernment. Open-ended, honest prayer and being doers of the Word and not merely hears of the Word, is the only way forward. If we can do that, then people will say of us, this great nation is a wise and discerning people!

~Fr. Phil