

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time – B  
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Holy Family Catholic Church  
Kirkland, Washington  
02 September 2018

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

*Be Oh So Pleasant (and Loving)*

Earlier this week I was on a retreat for priests for a few days at the Palisades in Federal Way. Each night, as part of the retreat, our retreat director had us watch a good movie. Part of the reason was to provide a break from the intensity of the retreat; a way to lighten things up a little bit, especially in the case that any of us might be processing any spiritual or emotional stress during the retreat.

Another important reason he had was that good movies have a way of reaching our hearts. Sometimes the information we receive from listening to talks and reading a workbook during a retreat might get stuck in our head as concepts or principles. Whereas a good movie has the ability to plant those principles in our hearts so that they can take root, begin to blossom, and bear good fruit in our lives.

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In this week's Gospel, Jesus engaged the Pharisees and scribes about the traditions of the elders, that is, the long list of detailed written and unwritten laws that dealt with the ways to give right worship to God.<sup>1</sup> Similar to what our retreat director had explained to us, the information about the Law had become stuck in their heads as concepts or principles. The Pharisees and scribes hadn't allowed God's Word to take root in their hearts and bear good fruit in the world.<sup>2</sup> This situation reminded me of a movie I saw several years ago, the classic 1950 film called *Harvey*, starring the great Jimmy Stewart.<sup>3</sup>

Stewart plays Elwood P. Dowd, a middle-aged single man who seems to have lost touch with reality. He's polite and kind; liked by everyone he meets. But he constantly embarrasses his sister and niece in social settings. The reason is that in any conversation he has, he inevitably tells people about his best friend: a six-foot three-and-a-half-inch invisible rabbit named Harvey. Throughout the movie his sisters are continually trying to hide him from friends, while also working to get him committed to a psychiatric hospital.

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Toward the end of the movie, Elwood was being interviewed by the psychiatrist. He explained to the doctor his outlook on life, which captures a principle from today's Gospel. He said: "Years ago my mother used to say to me, ... 'In this world, Elwood, you must be oh so smart, or oh so pleasant.' Well, for years I was smart. I recommend pleasant."

With this quote, Elwood described what conversion of heart had looked like in his life. How he made the change from letting his mind lead his life, to letting his heart take the lead. This doesn't mean that he became unintelligent. He's still clearly a smart man. What it means, however, is that he began to focus on letting virtues and goodness take root in his heart and bear fruit in his relationships with other people.<sup>4</sup>

This quote from Elwood explains why Jesus had a problem with the Pharisees and scribes. They were "oh so smart", but they were not pleasant. They knew all the details of the Jewish Laws. They were experts on all ten Commandments; 613 laws written in the Torah; and thousands of written and unwritten laws that they were charged with enforcing and passing on through their traditions. But they had lost touch with the purpose of the Law: *to help all people know and love God and one another.*<sup>5</sup>

They used their intelligence to teach outward principles, but internally, “their hearts [were] far from [Jesus].”<sup>6</sup> God’s Word had entered their minds as concepts and principles, but it had not touched their hearts. It had not entered the place where it could take root and begin to bear truly good fruit in the world. And because they were “so smart” (focused on the external expression of the Law) rather than “so pleasant” (focused on the internal expression of the Law), they were lacking in the two greatest laws: “...love the Lord...with all your heart...” and “...love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>7</sup> Consequently, because they were not tending to their hearts, defiling things came from them rather than purifying: bad thoughts, greed, malice, deceit, envy, and arrogance.<sup>8</sup> Rather than purifying and bringing people closer to God and each other, their actions caused division and defilement.<sup>9</sup>

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Elwood didn’t come to this conversion on his own. It was his relationship with Harvey that inspired him. And so Elwood’s relationship with Harvey is an allegory for *our* relationship with Jesus Christ. Harvey was invisible to everyone except Elwood. But through Elwood’s friendship with and witness to Harvey – not just in words, but in acts of love – Harvey became *real* to the world. And other people started to see him.

As disciples and friends of Jesus Christ, we, too, are called to make Him real to the world. Like Elwood, we are called to be “so pleasant” – to let Christ’s Love take root in our heart and begin to bear good fruit in the world. Not just in our words, but in our acts of love.<sup>10</sup> Our acts of love have a two-fold effect: they both make Christ’s Love present to the world, and they make Christ’s Love take stronger root in our hearts so that we can continue to grow more loving.

This week, let us all take many opportunities to be pleasant and loving – to make Christ’s Love real to the world. Smile and say hello to people. Help out with chores around the house. Make friends with a new student at school. Share your games and toys with your brothers and sisters. Make a meal for New Bethlehem Day Center. Give blood for Sweet Jane next Saturday.

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Another way that we make Christ’s Love real here at Holy Family is through an important ministry called Alpha. I’d like to invite Zoe Zhang to witness to us how she became better friends with Jesus through Alpha, and how Alpha gives all of us the opportunity to invite other people to become better friends with Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> See Mark 7:3-4

<sup>2</sup> See James 1:21b: “Humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you and is able to save your souls.”

<sup>3</sup> *Harvey* (1950); plot summary from <http://archive.usccb.org/movies/h/harvey1950.shtml>:

Amusing adaptation of the Mary Chase play about affable imbibor Elwood P. Dowd (James Stewart) whose drinking companion is an invisible six-foot rabbit which leads to some zany mix-ups when Elwood’s slightly dotty sister (Josephine Hull) tries to have her brother committed. Directed by Henry Koster, the stogy but amiable comedy centers in Stewart’s winning performance as the good-natured eccentric, with much goofy byplay from a fine supporting cast, especially the incomparable Hull, Cecil Kellaway as the bemused asylum director and Jesse White as a bemused attendant. Comic inebriation. (A-II – adults and adolescents)

<sup>4</sup> Our First Reading alludes to true wisdom and intelligence, which comes from a close, personal relationship with God. We provide evidence of this wisdom and intelligence with our acts of love (see Deuteronomy 4:6-7; also see Psalm 15:2-5):

“Observe them carefully, for thus will you give evidence of your wisdom and intelligence to the nations, who will hear of all these statutes and say, ‘This great nation is truly a wise and intelligent people.’ For what great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the LORD, our God, is to us whenever we call upon him?”

<sup>5</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* 1:

“For this reason, at every time and in every place, God draws close to man. He calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength. He calls together all men, scattered and divided by sin, into the unity of his family, the Church.”

<sup>6</sup> Mark 7:6

<sup>7</sup> Mark 12:30, 31; also see Deuteronomy 6:5

<sup>8</sup> Mark 7:21-22

<sup>9</sup> Mark 7:23

<sup>10</sup> See our Second Reading (James 1:22, 27):

“Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves. . . Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for [the vulnerable and those in need]. . .”