

**Proper 17, Year B**  
**The Rev. Martha L. Hubbard**

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**St. Paul's, Nbpt, MA**

Several years ago, Marco and I attended an international academic conference on Francophone culture, at which he presented a paper on French Colonialism. The conference was held in Tunisia, where Marco had spent his high school years, so it was a nice chance for me to see a landscape that had helped form him into who he is.

We met quite a few Americans at that conference, so we were able to have conversations in English over meals and at break times between conference sessions. I kept waiting for someone to ask me about my work, as it was obvious from my meager French, that I was not a French educator. But no one asked. After 3 ½ days, I finally found an opening in the mealtime conversation to make reference to my work as a priest - still no bites. I have to admit, it frustrated me that no one there seemed to be the least bit interested in my world of work.

It was then that it dawned on me how Marco must often feel at the many functions we attend where church talk dominates. It also became clear to me just how much of my sense of identity was wrapped up in my vocation as a priest.

I suspect this is true for many of us – what we do in life deeply influences our sense of who we are. Whether we are employed, or unemployed, stay at home parents, or nearly full time volunteers in our retirement, the routine and rhythm of the way we spend our hours becomes central to the way we define who we are. Just look what happens when those defining activities change and shift – see what happens to our sense of ourselves.

I remember the year that we tried to convince my grandfather to give up his driver's license. It was a difficult time. My grandfather was tenacious in holding on to that license. He was in his early 90's, and he and my grandmother were already living in a Sr. residence, where everything was done for them. She no longer cooked or cleaned. He no longer gardened or maintained a house. So, many of the activities that had defined them for years were now absent. The car was their last link to life as they had once known it. With the car they could get out on drives to see the countryside and to visit friends.

They lived in Canada where there is a mandatory yearly driving test once you reach the age of 80. And my grandfather had been able to pass it each year. But that year, he began to decline and his reaction times behind

the wheel were not what they should have been, but the yearly test was still several months away. Before we could prevail upon him to hang up the keys, he had an accident in which he was at fault. Luckily no one was killed or severely injured. But his car was totaled. It was then that he admitted he should no longer be behind the wheel. He mourned the loss of that piece of independence and identity, even though he knew it was the right decision.

It was just such a decision that Jesus longed to lead the Pharisees to in this morning's Gospel. As a rabbi Jesus knew and respected the Pharisees, who made it their life's work to protect the identity of the Jewish People as Yahweh's people. The Pharisees did this through strict adherence to the holiness codes that over the years had been derived from the Law of Moses. The problem was that the code had become voluminous and rigid, making difficult requirements on the faithful. It was this Pharisaical rigidity that brought Jesus into conflict with the Pharisees in this morning's Gospel.

As usual, Jesus response to such Pharisees is an attempt to get them to see just how wrong they had gone in the honorable task of preserving Israel's sense of identity as God's people. His first tact is to quote from the

Prophet Isaiah, whose words would have been very familiar and sacred to the Pharisees. He says:

*"Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."*

Jesus is trying to stir up the Pharisees conscience - to make them see that the traditions they seek to uphold are too expensive and complicated for the poor, uneducated common people to keep. Instead of guarding the people's sense of identity as God's people, the rigid holiness code is excluding those without the means or education to navigate its complexities.

Jesus wants this to stop. He wants the Pharisees to focus on the central heart of the law, which Jesus elsewhere summarizes with these words: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and your neighbor as yourself."*

Jesus wanted people to hold onto that simple, yet challenging summary of the law, and let go of the thousands of traditions found in the holiness code. But that was a bitter pill for the Pharisees to swallow, as it

threw into question the value of their life's work, which was central to their sense of identity.

Jesus goes on to say, *"Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile"* Here Jesus is saying that it is what is in the human heart that is important. It is what is in our heart, and the words and actions that spring from that core, that tell most about us. So, even when the mechanisms and activities by which we define ourselves fall away, our heart speaks volumes about who we are.

Jesus called the Pharisees to let go of a rigid obsession with tradition, in order to let the love of God dwell deeply in their hearts. He calls us to the same. Sometimes he leads us to this by placing us in situations where the ways we define ourselves are not understood or found interesting or even noticed by others. Sometimes the externals we are called to let go of are more permanent as we move from one season of our life into another.

There is one thing all of us can be certain – we cannot freeze ourselves in time. Change will come to our lives, and our bodies, but the constant we can count on is God's presence and grace with us through it

all. So perhaps the only vocation that will ever truly define us is the vocation of our connection to God in prayer.

A Sufi poet, whose name I do not know, once wrote:

*The prayer is an excellent act,  
but its spirit and meaning are more excellent than its form,  
even as the human spirit is more excellent and more enduring than the form.  
For the human form does not abide forever,  
but the spirit does.  
In the same way, the form of the prayer does not remain,  
but its meaning and spirit do.*

May our spirit intertwine more and more with the Holy Spirit, even as the form of our lives flow and change. In Christ's name. Amen+