

Sermon – Mark 7:1-8, 14-15,21-23 – Pentecost 14 – August 29, 2021

Tradition is a powerful thing. It grounds us. It shapes us. It gives us practices that bind us together in communities large and small. It teaches us the “right” way of doing things.

There was a town, where the local High School choir would perform Handel’s Messiah every year at Christmas. And when they would get to the Hallelujah chorus the music director would invite past students, alumni and community members to join the choir onstage to sing. Children waited their schooling years to be old enough to sing in that choir. University students would ensure they were home in time for the performance. The whole community came out. People looked forward to it all year long. And then the inevitable happened. The school music director retired and a new director was hired. And guess what? The new director cut the winter concert ... and — with it — the “Hallelujah Chorus.”

As you might expect, there was an uproar — from students, from alumni, from community members who felt they were losing a piece of their Christmas celebration.

Now, this was not really about the Hallelujah Chorus. If you look hard enough, you can find plenty of places to sing or hear this music during the holidays.

But for this community, this was about tradition ... This was about the ritual of singing a particular song at a particular time of year. This was about a practice that connected generations of graduates to the community that had formed them. This was about the way they’d always done things ... about the right way of doing things.

And I know we do the same sorts of things in church. We quickly learn to count on a certain predictability of the activities of Sunday school and worship, and we are very hesitant to see them change. If we are not careful, some of these expectations become

full-fledged traditions. They take on significance far greater than simply being a convenient routine.

Some things become almost holy and unchangeable. And we all saw how that played out during the pandemic. How hard it was and still is not to have fellowship time or remember Easter 2020? Boy did I grieve the loss of the traditions of the Triduum. It was very difficult but, in some way, we adapted and changed. We grew and formed new traditions based on the foundations of traditions past. But it's when our traditions become unchangeable they have moved from being sacred rituals to being sacred cows. Then, when someone tampers with a sacred cow, people become very upset.

Every church has such traditions that have become sacred cows. In one church John was the priest in, the color of the carpet had become the sacred cow. They had always had red carpet, but now the property committee was going to change it to blue. Some people just weren't sure they could worship God on a BLUE CARPET, God forbid.

Then again, at a former parish of mine, when we sang "Eternal father Strong to save" we had to sing it out of the old blue 1932 hymnal (apparently it has the right words!). Boy did the Church music director hate it!

It seems that every church manages to elevate certain practices from the routine to sacred traditions. Church growth specialist Bill Easum once wrote about book about this phenomenon. He called it "Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers." Churches that grow have to find a way to eat those sacred cows.

But not all traditions are bad. Some traditions are important. They can be a valuable aid in communicating to us the truth about God and the truth about ourselves.

In our Gospel for today, Jesus speaks about the kind of tradition that fails the test. He points out that there is a kind of tradition that is wrong, that gets in the way of spiritual realities rather than pointing to them.

Mark begins chapter seven with a marked change of pace. The change comes because of the on-going conflict with the Pharisees. This chapter gathers together many of the sayings of Jesus that directly conflicted with the traditions of the day.

Here we find that the Pharisees and scribes were upset with some of Jesus' disciples because they were not properly observing the traditions of the elders at mealtime. And note, that the "tradition of the elders" is **NOT** the teaching of Moses as found in the Bible. It is the practice of the Judean elite (about 5% of the Jewish population) which they are seeking to impose as **THE** one and only correct practice. It was a practice only afforded by the upper class. And the practice in question: that the disciples were not performing the ceremonial washings of their hands before they ate.

Before the Elite Jews would eat, they poured water over their hands with the fingers pointed upward. This water was kept in special jars and guarded to be free from any impurities. The Jews washed their hands and then poured water again over their hands from the wrists; this time holding their fingers downward. It was thought that in this fashion, they would purify their hands from any ceremonial uncleanness. Now this

action had nothing to do with hygiene. It was merely a ceremonial washing, and it had become a very important tradition.

Jesus saw through their dead tradition. He saw that they were more concerned with outward things than they were with the things that really count. And that the tradition and ritual really created an “us and them” scenario.

Jesus cut through the superficiality of their outward observances to stress that the inside was more important than the outside. Jesus was more concerned with their heart condition than their hand condition.

God is more concerned with who we are on the inside than the outward ceremonies we observe. You can pray standing up or you can pray sitting down and still never really offer a sentiment of prayer. You can wash your hands a thousand times and still have sin in your heart. You can sing every song in the 1932 hymnal and still not know God. You can worship on red carpet all your life and never really experience holy ground. You can take bread and the cup every week and still never commune with God. It's not the outward form of the tradition that matters; it's what lies in our hearts that counts.

Our traditions and rituals tell stories about our values, about our history, about our gratitude for God's faithfulness. But they do not LIMIT or DEFINE God's faithfulness and action. And these traditions are not meant to be used as measuring sticks of others' faithfulness, or as weapons to exclude or criticize those who do things differently.

We could have the most liturgically, historically, and theologically precise tradition of worship and welcome—where we sing, preach, kneel, pray and proclaim God’s love for all. But none of that matters if we’re not actually loving God and loving others. None of that matters if we’re not actually in relationship with God and neighbor. None of that matters if we’re pointing fingers and casting judgment on others.

The mission before us is quite simple as we continue to seek first God’s kingdom. And that is to continue to form communities that are radically welcoming, committed to justice, rooted in the Gospel, and sent out into the world.

So, for me, it boils down to a question that is really answered in the James reading. And the question is: which is more important to you? Being right or doing right. And doing right is to care for the orphans and widows – the disenfranchised of our communities – the vulnerable, the oppressed, impoverished. And when we respond to God in this way we are responding through the heart. And not because its our tradition but because it is who we are called to be as the people of God. Amen.