

TRADITIONS

TEXT: Mark 7:1-18

Some of the things that impact our lives, things that give special meaning to our lives, are the traditions that we remember from childhood. I would guess that many of us still practice some of these things today. And we remember fondly those things that bring a smile to our faces. For me, it was the grace we always said together before meals, it was the family with whom we shared Thanksgiving and New Years Day each year, it was the trip to Marshall Fields before Christmas (you do know that “Christmas isn’t Christmas without a day at Fields”?)

Our communities have traditions too. Next week-end the entire Grays Harbor community will turn out for Logger’s Playday, anxious to watch their neighbors or co-workers vie for honors in the time-honored traditions of the logging industry. And we all know the tradition of rivalry between Hoquiam and Aberdeen.

And, as our text for today reminds us, our religious life has its traditions as well. The focus today is on the tradition of ritual hand-washing. Apparently, the basis for proper hand washing in Judaism was originally related to the Temple service and sacrifices. It’s outlined in Exodus, which tells the people: *Before going into the tent of meeting, Aaron and his sons were to wash their hands and their feet.* In the wake of the destruction of the Temple, however, everything changed. There were no longer ritual objects and processes to be followed. Still, the rabbis did not want to lose the importance of hand washing, so they moved it to the dining room table or home “altar”. In essence, they attempted to bring the holy into every day life. At some point, though, what was meant to be a life giving practice became a means of designating insiders and outsiders. Even more than that, from what Jesus offers today, in some cases, at least, it had somehow become an empty ritual which no longer, in fact, led people closer to God.

I think we can see that it goes beyond just the idea about washing hands. It’s about the tradition and authority behind that practice. Which is the point the Pharisees

press: “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders”, they ask, somewhat aghast at the implications of Jesus and his disciples running rough shod over tradition. What is at stake, then, is not just a specific practice but the larger question of authority. In short, the Pharisees want to know just who does Jesus think he is to flout the tradition of the elders?

Then the Pharisees notice the disciples eating without washing their hands, but the Pharisees also do not eat anything from the market without washing it first. This makes obvious sense to us to clean off any residual dirt or pesticides, but of course it is a completely different thing with the Pharisees. They are not worried about dirt or pesticides (they just sprinkle them with water, they don’t submerge or scrub them), they are worried that the grower might have planted the crop on the Sabbath or in a field with other plants that are not supposed to be mixed in the same plot; they might have been handled in some unclean way, by some unclean person. You can never be too careful, lest you expose yourself to something that might defile you. After all, the Pharisees have authority over all such things.

But it is not simply about authority; its authority linked to behavior. Our everyday, ordinary, decisions about how we treat each other. Which is why Jesus throws the “tradition of our elders” thing back in their faces. *Want to talk about tradition?* Jesus asks, *Then let’s talk about the tradition – make that a commandment - of honoring your parents. Seems pretty straight forward to me, and yet you’ve found a religious loop-hole by which you can declare your wealth an offering to God and thereby not have to share it with your parents!*

In other words, Jesus is challenging them as to how their traditions contribute – or not contribute - to them fulfilling their mission. And this is where I see this reading to apply to our shared life.

I would suggest, we still sometimes find ourselves today where the Pharisees were. Something is put in place with all good intentions and is perhaps, quite meaningful

to many. After a time, we find ourselves believing there is only one way of doing things because that is the way it has always been done. Or we have done it so often it has become rote and loses meaning altogether. And yet, somehow, it gets all caught up in our experience of faith.

Perhaps, at first blush, we don't seem to be quite as fussy about tradition as Jesus' opponents did, but what if we were to do some tinkering with some of our own traditions?

Over the five years that I have served here in Hoquiam, we have made a few minor changes in our Order of Worship. We've moved the altar forward so that it is part of our worship space instead of back against the wall. But what about the rituals that we, as Christians, or especially as United Methodists, cling to? I'm not talking about turning our worship upside down, but what would happen if we changed some of the wording of our "rituals" so that they move from remote lip-service to words and phrases that we will think about more deeply and bring a different meaning to what we say?

Suppose we use other ways of reciting The Lord's Prayer. Might we find ourselves really praying instead of rote reciting? Can we find ways of transforming other acts of worship that might really bring us to a more worshipful state?

We have, on occasion, used various liturgies for Holy Communion, especially on World Communion Day, or All Saints Celebration, and have even used a Native American version. What would happen if we changed this ritual to something more contemporary that might speak to a younger generation of worshippers?

I would like to explore the idea of tradition, and the ways that our traditions can be made more meaningful by causing us to step back and see them in new and, I hope, meaningful language or style. What if we found ways to better understand the meaning behind some of the traditions to help us find how they enhance our worship experience?

You probably get the idea. We each have traditions that are more than traditions. They are markers of what has been accepted as right and wrong and thereby serve to lend us a sense of stability. This passage from Mark serves both to relativize our traditions – should we really hold them sacred? – while also pushing us to the far more important concern of the law to help us care for each other.

I'd like to see us have some dialogue about our traditions. What changes would make our congregational life more understandable, accessible, useful and helpful? What might we as a congregation do that will help us put mission ahead of tradition. That's not an easy journey. You may have heard the age-old question "How many Methodists does it take to change a light bulb?" "Change? Change? My grandfather donated that light bulb!"

We love our traditions. I love our traditions. They have helped to mediate the faith to us in countless ways. But what if they are not doing that for the emerging generation? What if we've come close to worshipping the traditions instead of the God they were supposed to point to? And what if Jesus is calling us to put our mission – whether to care for our aging folks, feeding the hungry, opening our doors to the homeless, making our building available for after school tutoring, sharing the Gospel with folks much of the church rejects, partnering with the community to care for more of God's children, whatever – what if Jesus is calling us to put our mission ahead of even our most cherished traditions?

It's a conversation we need to have. Let's start by thinking about it for a week or so, then let's begin to see what God has in store for us. We might just be surprised! Amen.