

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church  
Shobonier, Illinois  
Pentecost 13B (Proper 16B)  
August 22, 2021  
Mark 7:1-13

### The Trouble with Traditions

And [Jesus] said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "' This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' 8 You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men." (Mark 7:6-8 ESV)

In the Name of Jesus, the only Savior of the world.

There was once a young boy who, when called to the dinner table, took his seat promptly. His mother would ask, "Did you wash your hands?" He would get up, go to the bathroom, wet his hands, dry them, and return to the table. His mother would ask, "Did you use soap?" Again, he got up, went to the bathroom, properly washed his hands, and returned to the table.

This mother did not go through all this for the sake of tradition, but for the sake of hygiene. She wanted her son to learn healthy habits.

But such was not the case with the Pharisees and scribes. When they complained to Jesus about His disciples eating with unwashed hands, it was not a matter of hygiene, but tradition. So Jesus addresses just that point, for their traditions had gotten out of control. Now one can hardly talk about traditions without thinking of Tevye from "Fiddler on the Roof." He sings, "Because of our traditions, we've kept our balance for many, many years. Here in Anatevka we have traditions for everything: how to sleep, how to eat, how to work, how to wear clothes. For instance, we always keep our heads covered and always wear a little prayer shawl. This shows our constant devotion to God. You may ask: How did this tradition get started? I'll tell you: I don't know. But it's a tradition. And because of our traditions, every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do."

Unfortunately for Tevye, Jesus disagrees. After all, God Himself tells us who we are and what He expects us to do. That's why Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees "hypocrites" and says to them, "You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men." And again, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!" And again, He says, "You are making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down." Tradition? Jesus seems to be saying, "Phooey on tradition!"

Now Jesus is not condemning all traditions. After all, there are many traditions that are quite good. Jesus Himself kept some of the traditions. He went regularly to the synagogue – "as was

his custom,” the gospels add. He went up to Jerusalem for the annual pilgrimage festivals. So it appears that Jesus was not against all tradition.

After all, the word “tradition” means “something handed down,” handed down from one generation to the next. It could be a traditional teaching or a traditional practice. But the teaching or practice is neither good nor bad simply because it has been handed down. There are other considerations.

The Apostle Paul tells the Corinthians, “Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you.” Here he’s speaking about doctrine and good worship practices. And a little later he tells them: “For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed,” etc. Paul here applies the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper to their practice of it. “What I received from the Lord I delivered to you.” (1 Cor. 11). I passed it on. That’s tradition.

Again Paul writes: “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved. . . . For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. . . .” (1 Cor. 15). Do those words sound familiar? They should. Paul’s words—the tradition he passed on—have found their way into the Church’s creeds. The traditional teaching of the person and work of Christ, the Savior of sinners, saves lives.

That’s why Paul told the Thessalonians: “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us.” And to Timothy: “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” That’s multi-generational tradition! And the apostle wants it to happen. Why? Because it accords with God’s Word and delivers Christ and His gifts.

But when the Pharisees and scribes held to traditions for tradition’s sake or especially traditions that contradict or circumvent the Word of God and lead people to false belief, those traditions have to go. That’s what Jesus addresses. You see, as far as washing hands, they thought that such a ritual washing was not a matter of hygiene, but was necessary to purify them before God. But nothing you can do will purify you before God. Your standing before God is based only on believing in Jesus who gave His life and shed His blood for you.

Then there was a tradition that if you declared some of your money “Corban,” that is, a gift dedicated to God, then you could not use it for any other purpose. However, the scribes and Pharisees abused that tradition. If their parents became old and needed their help, they would say they had set their extra money aside as “Corban” and therefore they could not spend it to help their parents. That was outrageous, Jesus says. The Pharisees and scribes were circumventing a direct command from God in the Fourth Commandment, “Honor your father and your mother,” and they were using a man-made tradition about “Corban” as their excuse.

That is the kind of tradition that Jesus condemns here – a tradition made up by man but taught as a doctrine of God.

So, how about the traditions we have in the Church? Certainly there are many fine traditions we would be wise to keep and to pass on to the next generation. Included among these would be the Creeds, for example. Here we have the teaching of the apostles, passed on for centuries in the Church, and preserved for us in succinct, memorable form. The Creeds pass on the saving gospel of Christ, which we have received, and in which we stand, and by which we are saved. What tradition could be better than the Nicene Creed, for instance, which teaches us of our Lord Jesus Christ, “who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven . . . and was crucified also for us,” and who “rose again according to the Scriptures,” and so on?

You see, that is the gospel itself, which the apostles preached, which we believe, and which delivers to us all the saving benefits of Christ. Our works and traditions won’t gain us entry into heaven. Our hands are defiled with sin, and all our self-chosen works will not get that stain out. Only the blood of Jesus Christ, God’s own Son, will do that. And it does! Jesus’ blood cleanses us from all our sins. The washing God does in Holy Baptism applies the forgiveness Christ won for us on the cross. This is the gospel, and it is for you! And this gospel, passed on to us in Word and Sacrament, delivers the goods. That is the value of tradition in the good sense. And that is what we should preserve, therefore, in the teachings and practices of the church.

Of course, there are many other traditions that are good and useful for the Gospel and should be kept. The liturgy – the structure and texts of the Divine Service, which we have and use in our hymnal – is certainly worth using, preserving, and passing on. So are vestments, crossing oneself, even worshiping on Sunday (or Saturday). These and many other traditions are not absolutely necessary, they don’t merit anything from God, but they are good and useful for they help to deliver God’s gifts in Christ.

But if a tradition in the Church, or in our lives for that matter, doesn’t point us to Christ, if it directs our attention to someone or something else other than Christ and His saving work, if it teaches something contrary to God’s Word, or it gets in the way or distracts us from Christ and His gifts, then that tradition has got to go. But when a tradition serves the Word of God and helps pass along the one and only saving gospel of Christ, then we can say--and sing out with no shame: “Tradition! Tradition!” To the glory of Christ’s holy name. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

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