

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
Pentecost 14B - Proper 16B
August 25, 2024
Mark 7:1-13

Traditions of Men

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,

Tradition is "that which is handed down." It's often understood as "it's just what we do." There are various kinds of traditions of course. Families have their traditions. Businesses have their traditions. Churches and congregations have their traditions. Even individual people have their traditions. Even then, they are not all of the same kind or importance.

As an example of traditions and how they are handed down, there was once a young bride who was going to have the family for Christmas dinner. She was going to serve ham. The day came and she took the ham and lopped off each end of it, put it in the pan, and put it in the oven. When her husband asked her why she cut off the ends of the ham, she said that's what her mother did. When they asked her mother about it, she said that her mother always cut off the ends of the ham. When they asked her, she told them that's what her mother did. Thankfully, they were able to ask her about it and she told them that when she as a young wife and wanted to prepare a ham, it was too big to fit in her pan. So, she lopped off the ends to make it fit. That's often how traditions are passed down. Though the reason that caused it in the first place no longer applied, the tradition lived on.

And while that's a silly tradition, no harm was done by continuing it or by stopping it. But there are other traditions that are not so benign.

That's why we hear Jesus today condemn the "traditions of the elders," when His disciples are accused by the Pharisees and scribes of not washing their hands before eating. He takes them to task for making their man-made rules more important than God's law. He calls them 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."

So what Jesus is condemning is not tradition itself, but tradition that obscures or contradicts God's Word. After all, there are some traditions that are quite good and worthy of handing down. Jesus Himself kept some of them. He went regularly to the synagogue--"as was his custom," the gospels add. He went up to Jerusalem for the annual pilgrimage festivals. And this in accord with God's Word.

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." (1 Cor. 11). He's speaking about good worship practices. And a little later in that same chapter, Paul tells them: "What I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed," etc. He applies the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, which he received and then passed on to the Corinthians, to their practice of it.

Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 15, 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. . . ." Do those words sound familiar? They should. Paul's words--the tradition he passed on--have found their way into the church's creeds. Paul's speaking of passing on, delivering, that which has been received--and that this can even save people! It does so when it's the traditional teaching of the person and work of Christ, the Savior of sinners.

Still other examples, Paul writes to the Thessalonians: "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us." Or Paul writing 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 tradition that hands down the Gospel of Christ from generation to generation. Would to God that it continues.

So why does Jesus condemn the "traditions of the elders?" For one thing, these man-made traditions were seen as necessary. You had to do them--even though God had not commanded them to be done. For example, you had to wash your hands at certain times and in a certain way before you could eat. But God had not said that you had to do that. That was a tradition added on by the elders. And so those rules should not have been made absolutely necessary, as though they were coming from God.

Secondly, these traditions were seen as meritorious, that is, you were earning your salvation, or contributing toward it, by doing these things. The thought was that if you did these things, and followed the traditions, that somehow you were piling up points with God. But the

truth is, we sinners cannot keep God's law, which He has commanded, well enough to earn our salvation, even apart from keeping all the extra traditions that men have added on.

Thirdly, the scribes and Pharisees were using the traditions of the elders to avoid doing the things God does command. That is specifically what Jesus condemns. You see, 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 that money for any other purpose. OK, fair enough. It is good to set some of our money aside for offerings to God. However, the scribes and Pharisees abused that tradition. If their parents became old and needed their help, they would say they couldn't help because they had set their extra money aside as "Corban." That was outrageous, Jesus says. The Pharisees and scribes were circumventing a direct command from God, the Fourth Commandment, "Honor your father and your mother," and they were using a man-made tradition about "Corban" as their excuse.

So when a man-made tradition is taught as being absolutely necessary, when it is done in order to earn merit before God, or when it is used to take precedence over God's clear commandments, then that kind of tradition is definitely wrong and needs to go. That's what Jesus condemns, and that's what we should condemn, too.

Of course, we have traditions in the church that would be good to pass on to the next generation. Included among these good traditions would be the Creeds. In them 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, the one "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, and which we believe, and which delivers to us all the saving benefits of Christ. Our works 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 gifts of God. That's a tradition that should be preserved.

And so our liturgy, the church's historic liturgical form, handed down and shaped over many centuries is something worth preserving and passing on. The church's liturgy has stood the test of time. It both expresses and teaches the beautiful gospel of Christ better than anything else that some individual could come up with on his own from week to week. So there's no need to throw out the liturgy. Better to learn and use it and to do it well.

Then there are traditions of Bible reading, family devotions, coming to church each week, prayers before and after meals, and when we go to bed and rise, and so on. These give glory to God as we listen to His Word and lead holy lives according to it. And that is a tradition worth passing on to the next generation. Amen.

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

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