

What did I just wash?;\_Based on Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23; August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015  
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What runs through your mind when I say the word “Tradition”? Tradition!! This one word probably invokes memories of rituals and repeated customs that you and your family follow at holidays and other gatherings. Some traditions we follow and pass on without question, even if it is inconvenient or doesn’t make sense to us. Why? Because it’s tradition!! Today’s reading from the Gospel of Mark speaks to traditions of the Jewish law. The Pharisees and scribes condemn the disciples for not following the tradition of the elders and washing their hands before eating. The Jewish laws demand that food from the markets be washed before being eaten and hands cleansed before every meal not because of germs, but because they felt unclean hands would defile the food therefore defiling the person who ate this impure food.

Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah saying that these religious leaders are not just hypocrites but also have abandoned the commandments of God. These are the religious leaders and teachers who are experts in the Jewish law and who dedicate their lives to upholding these traditions and laws, yet Jesus is basically telling them “you’ve got it all wrong”. It’s not about washing your hands to keep the food clean or following human ritual and tradition that creates a righteous person. It’s about what’s in your heart that makes someone righteous, and that cannot be tainted by unclean food or filthy hands. This is when tradition becomes a barrier between the commandments of God and us.

One of my favorite movies and musicals is Fiddler on the Roof. Perhaps many have seen “Fiddler” and if you did, you haven’t forgotten it. “Fiddler on the Roof” is a classic story about a Jewish-Russian family, just before the great revolution in Russia, just about the time of the turn of the century. One thing the movie does is give you a feeling for the Jewish love of tradition.

“Fiddler on the Roof” is a story about Tevye, the old, bumbling Jewish patriarch, who was a poor farmer, his wife, Golda, the resilient Jewish mother; and their three lovely daughters, all of whom needed to be married. The plot of “Fiddler on the Roof” is the matchmaking of these three daughters. The story is that the town matchmaker is to meet with the mother and father and match their three daughters to prospective husbands. But the girls want to choose their own husbands and not use the matchmaker.

The parents, Tevye and Golda, made arrangements for their two oldest daughters to marry men that the town matchmaker had chosen for them. These two daughters had a difference of opinion and wanted to marry someone of their choosing. They finally worked up the courage to ask their father for permission and a blessing to marry someone of their choice.

Tevye interrupts and proclaims “What? You can’t do that! That violates our tradition. The father has a right to choose your husband. Who are you to fall in love?” But then, like so many fathers, he gave in. He granted permission for his daughters to marry men of their choosing. He blessed his daughters, grumbling, “Traditions, traditions, they are starting to change.”

The third daughter followed suit but went a step further; she fell in love with a non-Jew, with a Gentile Russian soldier. To Tevye, marrying a Gentile was an unforgivable sin. When this young couple came to Tevye, he could not stand any more. He refused to give his daughter in marriage; he refused to bless

her; he kicked her out of the house; he declared her as dead; and so his deeply loved daughter was lost to him. At the end of the story his daughter approaches him in one last time in desperation asking for his blessing.

Tevye was caught. What should he do? He had vowed that his daughter was dead to him, that he would never speak with her again but this is his daughter, his own flesh and blood that he loved so dearly from birth. And finally, in despair, Tevye turned his back on his daughter. He turned away from her, and held to tradition. No blessing and no peace.

“Fiddler on the Roof” is a story about a good man, Tevye, whose traditions are more important to him than the commandment to love and forgive as God loves and forgives. It was a story of a good man whose traditional interpretation of what he thought the Bible said, “Jews are not to marry Gentiles” was ultimately more important to him than the commandment of God for love, mercy and forgiveness. Tevye’s downfall was he held sacred his traditions more than the commandment of love and mercy for his daughter who did not believe in his traditions because she was following her heart in love.

In the gospel story for today, we find a story about Jewish leaders, scribes and Pharisees, who were good people. They were dedicated Jews just like Tevye. And these good scribes and Pharisees had their religious traditions. The Pharisees always said grace before and after every meal. They always prayed and attended the synagogue every Friday night. They always gave ten per cent of their income to the Lord. They always washed their hands before meals as a sign of religious piety. These traditions were found in the Old Testament and strictly followed by the Pharisees.

On considering today's reading, I have gained a deeper sense of its message through a story I heard when I was young but did not fully understand until well after college. It is a story of a group of alumni, highly established in their careers, who get together to visit their old university professor. Conversation soon turns into complaints about stress in work and life. Offering his guests coffee, the professor went to the kitchen and returned with a large pot of coffee and an assortment of cups - porcelain, plastic, glass, crystal, some plain looking, some expensive, some exquisite – and he tells them to help themselves to the coffee.

When all the alumni had a cup of coffee in their hands, the professor said: "If you noticed, all the nice looking expensive cups have been taken first, leaving behind the plain and misshapen and imperfect cups. While it is normal for you to want only the best for yourselves, that is the source of your problems and stress. Be assured that the cup itself adds no quality to the coffee. In most cases it is just more expensive and in some cases even hides what we drink. What all of you really wanted was coffee, not the cup, but you consciously went for the best cups... And then you began eyeing each other's cups, judging each person based on the aesthetics of their cup.

Consider this: Life and love is the coffee; the jobs, money and position in society are the cups. They are just tools to hold and contain Life, and the type of cup we have does not define, nor change the quality of life we live.

Are we clean and beautiful on the outside but withering and unfaithful on the inside? Do we do good things just so people see us doing good things? Do we attend church just to say we’re being good Christians? I was once told that the measure of a pure heart is not the good deeds someone does when others are watching but the good deeds they do when nobody will ever know what they did.

The Pharisees used their desire to obey God to create rules to clarify the law in these situations. Over time these rules became so hard and fast that they became a surrogate law that the Jewish leaders regarded as being equal to Scripture. They lost sight of the difference between God's law and their opinion. Jesus said that this was their sin. Jesus did not condemn all tradition. He only condemned those traditions that were elevated to sacred status. The church is responsible for preserving tradition, but it must make a clear distinction between essential scriptural teachings and non-essential traditions.

Rodger Nishioka talks about eight emerging ministry trends for the future church to engage and involve members in both ministry and worship. One of these trends is going from tribal education to immigrant education. In this case, the immigrant is the individual who is non-Presbyterian and not familiar with worship practices.

We have Church jargon that needs explanation. New people are coming to Church and they know nothing about what established church-goers take for granted: e.g. the Lord's Prayer, Gloria Patri (whom some people think is the author of the hymn), how to take communion (what intinction means), how to behave in church, what different elements of worship mean, what is familiar in terms of music or scripture, prayer responses, etc. The tribal language and customs are confusing and intimidating to new church attendees. 60% of people in The Presbyterian Church (USA) were not born and raised Presbyterian; 16% have no church history at all.

We need to be serious about education so that everyone is comfortable and learns the lingo. Church service is so filled with traditions that we memorize call and responses without needing a guide. If I were to say "The Lord be with you", how would you respond? "And also with you". Think about a person who is stepping into worship for the first time and looking at that response in their bulletin. At what point do traditions interfere with us truly worshipping the Lord instead of trying to keep up with the service? Now I'm not saying church traditions are bad in any way, we just need to make sure we educate others on our worship traditions so they can worship the Lord instead of feeling dazed and confused in worship.

We sometimes get so caught up in traditions that we create a wall between the laws of humans and the commandments of love and faith. Even our most holy and sacred holidays have been tainted by tradition. Easter candy sales and hiding Easter eggs are held over celebration of Christ's resurrection and redemption of sins. Christmas has become a consumer's holiday of sales and gifts over rejoicing the birth of the Messiah. They have become very subtle clouded traditions that we have accepted in society today. They are so accepted they have become the norm.

We must each discover how we can cleanse and purify our hearts to listen and be open to God. Instead of trying to impress God with lip service or empty actions we must embrace God with a dedicated heart and faith. I envision if Jesus asked me what I have done to help others, he wouldn't want me to pull out a list and start reading the bulleted accomplishments that I have recorded to prove I am a good Christian. I imagine he would want me to say something like "Jesus, my Lord, I don't know. I don't keep track of what I have done to help others, I just do it and move on to love the next neighbor who is in need".

This past July I was invited as a group leader at the Montreat Youth Conference in Montreat, North Carolina. This is a gathering of about 1200 high school students from across the country that attends this week long conference to discuss teen issues, renew and grow their faith, worship together and share in fellowship and fun. Each day, 30 youth would meet with me throughout the day for small group sessions and discuss pressing issues in their lives and in society.

I posed the question “If you had coffee with Jesus, what one question would you ask him?”. The most memorable question I heard was “Jesus, do you care if I wear jeans to church or do I have to dress up for God to hear my prayers?”. This is a real life example of the unwritten tradition that we must dress to impress and put on our Sunday best for a respectable worship service. The youth spent some time discussing this topic and they collectively came to the conclusion that it’s what’s inside that counts. To wrap the conversation up, one young lady said “If I met Jesus for coffee and he had a torn shirt, old and dirty jeans and put his elbows on the table and didn’t wash his hands before eating a sandwich; I would still love him as my Lord because I know his heart and spirit are filled with love for me.” I couldn’t have said it better myself.

Don’t let the beauty of the outside consume you and let the insides become spiritually dead like the Pharisees who condemned the disciples. Traditions should not become additions to God’s Word. Traditions, whether ancient or new, should be another way for us to proclaim God’s love, forgiveness and faith. Cleanse, wash and nurture your heart and your spirit through loving your neighbor as yourself and helping others because you are a servant of God. Keep sacred and uphold God’s traditions and commandments of love. Jesus is with us, right here, right now!! Now that’s a message worth proclaiming in Word, Sacrament, song, and even tradition!