

“Tradition or Truth?”

Mark 7:1-13

August 26, 2018

14th Sunday after Pentecost

What do decorating a Christmas tree, singing happy birthday, and putting your hand over your heart when the fly goes by all have in common? All of these are traditions - actions or attitudes which have been passed down from generation to generation and observed for many years. All of us have a variety of traditions – family traditions, holiday traditions, sporting traditions, and so on. With these traditions come long-established and very precise ways of doing things or thinking about things. Yet traditions are generally good things. However, at times, people can become very sensitive about traditions. Some people will become quite upset if the following traditions are altered or not observed: not singing Silent Night on Christmas Eve; having turkey at the family dinner on Easter, and not ham; playing Christmas music before December 1. Violations of traditions can cause a lot of conflict.

Nowhere is the emphasis on tradition and the conflict over broken tradition more evident than in the area of religion. These traditions reflect how we think about God or act toward God. People can hold these religious traditions very near and dear and can become very upset when they are violated. This is probably because people believe that our religious traditions and the proper exercise thereof have an effect on God and our relationship with Him.

So, are traditions good or bad, helpful or hurtful, necessary or voluntary in the practice of our faith? There are two basic views regarding the place of traditions in our spiritual lives. The first view is espoused by Tevya, in the musical “Fiddler on the Roof”, who said that everything in life must follow tradition – no exceptions! In explaining religious traditions about keeping one’s head covered in prayer and wearing prayer shawls, Tevye said forcefully, “This shows our constant devotion to God.” He then goes on to say, “You may ask – how did this tradition get started? I’ll tell you. I don’t know. But it’s a tradition!” Many think Tevye is more like a Lutheran than a Jew. However, I’m sure there are a number of churches across the land – in addition to the Lutherans – who believe that traditions are good and should be followed at any cost, even if it is not known why.

The second view of traditions is held by many people who want few, if any, tradition. They prefer newness and variety. They may even say that traditions are harmful for outreach or attracting the young or something like that. Just as there are traditional churches across the land, I’m sure there are also many progressive churches in which traditions are considered to be bad and should be replaced with more modern actions.

Who is right? Should we follow traditions simply because they are good and “that’s the way we’ve always done it before”, regardless of whether we understand them or not? Should we abandon tradition – anything that’s old – simply because it’s old and replace it with something new simply because it’s new? Are traditions somehow inherently bad? Some would use today’s Gospel reading to support that view.

Traditions can be bad when the behavior or action required by the tradition is placed on the same level as actions or behavior commanded in the Holy Scripture. This was the case with the first tradition spoken of in our text, handwashing. This tradition has nothing to do with physical hygiene and concern over eating food with dirt on one's hands. What the disciples were being criticized for was failing to follow a religious ritual in which hands were washed with pure water to make one spiritually clean. Other things washed in this manner were cups, pots, copper vessels, and dining couches. This was a rule instituted by the Pharisees which all the Jews it appears, tried to obey. So strict were they in following this command that they would refuse to eat if they did not first wash their hands according to this rule.

Of course, this ritual was not recorded in the Torah, the Law of God. Where did it come from? The text refers to it as "the tradition (literally, "that which has been passed down") of the elders." The Pharisees believed that God gave the written Law to Moses on stone tablets, but that God also have a spoken Law verbally to Moses for him to pass on. These verbal rules were passed down from generation to generation. The problem with this is that, while you have the written Word of God which you can see, touch, and read on the holy scrolls, you kind of had to take word of the Pharisees regarding the existence of these oral laws which were later written down, but apart from the written Law.

Jesus' condemnation doesn't seem to be of the action in this "tradition of the elders" though. There is nothing wrong with having a ceremonial handwashing to remind oneself of a purity before God. The criticism had to do with the way this tradition was being used. First of all, the religious leaders were placing these verbal traditions on the same level as the written Word of God. Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah, "in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." Secondly, they were forcing people to obey a commandment which God Himself has not commanded.

We have many traditions associated with our worship which have been passed down many years to us today. These are things like folding your hands and bowing your heads while praying, kneeling while receiving Holy Communion, and standing while worshipping, or, one like our text has: having a baptismal font with water in it at the back of the church for people to dip their fingers in, make the sign of the cross and remember their baptism.

Like the ceremonial washing in our text, these may be fine religious traditions. However, we may be in danger of treating our traditions in the same way as the Jewish religious leaders treated theirs – as if they are equal to the commands of the Bible and required behavior by everyone. While we may not say this in so many words (I'm not sure the religious leaders in Jesus' day did either.), we may act this way or feel this way. I've talked to people who have felt incredibly guilty if they cannot stand for the liturgy or kneel at the communion rail.

As the people in Jesus' day allowed this tradition to lead them away from the clear commands of God's Word in order to be more concerned about washed hands than washed souls, so, too, a tradition is bad for us if it causes us to be more

concerned about standing for worship than actually worshiping or more concerned about kneeling at the communion rail than receiving the Lord's body and blood there.

A tradition can be even worse when such a tradition contradicts the clear Word of God. This was the problem with the second example in our text regarding Corban. The Law of God spoke of Corban which meant an offering dedicated to God. Sometimes, a person, in anger or haste, would take money with which they could have used to care for their aged parents and dedicated to God instead. When the person came to his senses and then wanted to revoke his vow and care for his parents, the religious leaders would not permit him to do that. In effect, they caused people to violate the 4th Commandment regarding the honoring of parents in order to follow this man-made rule. Jesus has some harsh words for them. He says, "You make void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down."

Traditions that cause us, not only to be led away from the word of God (as in the first example), but to actually contradict the Word of God (as in the second example), replace the Word of God with human rules and cause us to disobey a clear command of God and that is wrong.

Any tradition, no matter how ancient or religious it is, is sinful when it requires us to do something God's law does not require or when it causes us to do that which violates God's clear command. Such traditions, rather than becoming spiritual, become sinful in their practice. In following such traditions, we are falling away from the Word of God and causing others to do the same.

However, does that mean traditions, in and of themselves, are bad or sinful? Not at all. Traditions can be good and helpful in our spiritual lives when they are commanded by God and have His blessing connected to it. For example, Jesus established the Lord's Supper by taking bread and wine, giving thanks, distributing them, and saying, "Take, eat, this is my body given for you. Take, drink, this is my blood of the new covenant, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus establishes a tradition – a pattern of behavior to be passed down – which provides the forgiveness of sins when he says, "Do this in remembrance of me." St. Paul, writing in 1st Corinthians, calls this a tradition as well when he writes about the meaning and practice of Holy Communion, "For I received from the Lord what I also deliver to you." In other words, what Jesus has passed down to me, I now pass on to you. So, we do this. We follow this tradition. We received the promised blessings connected to this tradition: the forgiveness of sin.

Traditions can be good when they are used to uphold the doctrines of Holy Scripture even if not commanded by Holy Scripture. For example, making the sign of the cross in many different situations, helps us to remember that we have been redeemed by Christ the Crucified. We have full and complete forgiveness for our sin, as well as an eternal home in heaven. As for our life now, the sign of the cross helps us to remember that we are children of God who have been redeemed by Him, blessed in good situations and protected by Him in bad situations.

Traditions are good when they help order our spiritual life. In that sense, Tevye may have been right. Ordering our prayer life or our worship life with certain traditions

– folded hands, bowed heads, sign of the cross, and so on – can help us keep us focused and ordered in these two important areas.

That leads to the final point about good tradition which is not mentioned in our text for today because it was probably not an issue in Jesus' time. Traditions are good when they are well explained and understood by those using them. If not, traditions are worthless or even worse. That's when we end up doing something "because that's the way we've always done it before." Such traditions and are not benefiting us and, possibly, lead us away from a clear understanding of the Word of God.

So, how are traditions to be used? Three things should be done. First, we should examine any proposed tradition (or even long time, greatly beloved traditions) to see if such traditions are either commanded by the Word of God or supportive of the Word of God. Any tradition, not commanded by God or not supportive of the Word of God must be used cautiously, if at all. However, any tradition that is commanded by God or clearly supports the Word of God may be used for the joy and edification of God's people.

Second, when new traditions are introduced or old traditions are being used, the meaning, purpose, and use of such tradition should be clearly explained so that people know how to follow such traditions why they should follow such traditions and what blessing they receive through following such traditions.

Third, no matter how beloved a tradition might be or how personally beneficial some people might feel that tradition is, if it is not commanded clearly by the Word of God, no one should be required to participate in it. We do not require what God has not required. We do not reject what God has not rejected.

Lutherans are often accused of being too traditionally minded. While there may be some truth to that, it is not necessarily a bad thing. Traditions can perform many useful tasks in our spiritual life. Change and the introduction of new traditions is not necessarily a bad thing, either. New insights and new benefits can come from new traditions. The focus is not on the tradition or the action being prompted by the tradition, but on the meaning of the tradition and whether it or not it supports the meaning of the Word of God. With regard to the title of the sermon, the question is never tradition OR truth, but truth taught, practiced, and proclaimed through our traditions. Amen.