

Sermon: 15th week of Pentecost (B)

Labor Day weekend

September 1, 2024

Gospel: Mark 7:1-8; 14-15; 21-23; Deut. 4:1-2, 6-9; Psalm 15; James 1:17-27

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Tradition...tradition! It's what the character, Tevye, from Fiddler on the Roof, is singing about in the opening scene. Tradition, you see, is what gave his people from the little town of Anatevka - their identity. Through their traditions, the villagers were able to hold on to what held them together during an uncertain time in history.

Tradition... held them in community and kept them from outside influences that may alter their identity.

And so it is today, in the gospel of Mark, that we find Jesus, smack dab in the middle of an argument with the Pharisees and Scribes about...tradition. What a place to start after six weeks of bread stories from the gospel of John - a heated exchange about washing your hands before you eat! Seems to me, that we have gone from manna...to manners... in a matter of weeks!

But if we think the story in our passage today is about just washing hands before we eat, or good manners, perhaps we have missed the point. You see, when we look a little bit deeper into what Mark's Jesus is doing, we find that it's not just about the *practice* of washing hands, it's about the tradition and *authority behind*... that practice. The tradition...you see, came from a myriad of purity laws - many of which were about the handling of food or dietary restrictions. Included in these 613 purity laws were specifics in clean and unclean foods, rituals after childbirth, the menstrual cycle and regulations for skin infections; laws that prohibited contact with a human corpse or dead animal; guidelines about planting seeds, mating animals and even decrees about bodily discharges...just to name a few. The purity laws encompassed nearly every aspect of being human - birth, death, sex, gender, health, and economics.

These laws not only regulated personal and community life for the emergent Hebrew people, but they differentiated the people from pagan nations and religions. The psalmist today asks, "Lord, who may dwell in your sanctuary?" And the "proper" response is that only, only people who are ritually clean may approach a holy God -

may enter the temple. At Bible study today, the general consensus was that most of us - perhaps all of us... would not be entering the temple! The traditional written laws of the Torah were created for a reason but when Jesus comes along, manners don't matter as much if they become a means of excluding people; especially those considered dirty, polluted, or contaminated.

Now... just how much of the purity law was orally handed down over time, we don't know. But what is clearly evident in the reading today, the Pharisees who confront Jesus, well... these religious elders hold tight to the traditions, especially the food laws. But If we take a closer look at the mission of Jesus today, we are apt to see a new tradition emerging. A tradition where...touching a leper, touching a woman with a discharge, handling a corpse and ignoring the sabbath....had more to do with relationship and loving the neighbor than it did with laws that neglected the marginalized and kept people on the outskirts of the city gates and the temple.

But guess what? Guess who's coming to dinner? Guess who Jesus has invited to the table where the bread of life is served? The Gentiles. Those who perhaps know nothing of the purity laws. Jesus' mission, you see, is the integration of both Jews and Gentiles into the new community. A community where all people can partake of the bread of life. A community where tradition will not be the overriding factor of pain, suffering and exclusion....the brokenness that is felt when a death occurs, a relationship has ended, or a divorce is pending. A tradition or traditions which keep the homeless and hungry at bay - those with dirty hands, ragged clothes and a stench from lack of personal hygiene. A tradition that holds fast to political ideals that hurt and maim and kill according to the precept of law. In fact, any tradition that veers away from the mission of Jesus, is worth examining. A mission of unity for the sake of community. A mission of acceptance. A mission of recognizing our diversity and *still* keeping the dialogue open; and *still* sitting down at the table together.

I believe Jesus' stark response to the religious leaders that day regarding his disciples "digging into the food with defiled hands" is also a stark reminder for us, too. And trust me, loving the neighbor as ourself is one tough assignment. You see,

sometimes it's easier to lean on the parameters of tradition than learn to love beyond the borders of our own self-righteousness and justification projects tied to tradition. So have we gone from manna to manners in these past several weeks? Or have we gone from manna (bread) to what matters? You see, Mark's Jesus is teaching priorities; to the Pharisees, to the Scribes, to the disciples, to those craning their necks to listen, and to you... and me... and the church...

...Jesus isn't talking about explicitly about manner. Jesus is talking about what matters as we live out our call as children of God. The traditions held so tightly by the religious leaders had become such a priority that it left people standing on the outskirts of the temple. The traditions you see, defeated the commandment of God to love. The religious traditions became a replacement for carrying out God's work of mercy and justice to the human misery of the world.

And I certainly don't want to diminish what the importance of traditions. My traditions, yours and the traditions of the church. We are celebrating the 160th anniversary of First Lutheran and trust me, I love the traditions that we have held fast to...the liturgy, hymns our parents and grandparents sang; candles at Christmas, fellowship dinners, outreach to the neighboring community and globally, faithfully tithing, feeding the homeless, caring for the sick and welcoming the stranger. Traditions! Traditions! That have defined us as a people and brought us this far..by faith.

But just like Moses reminded the people of Israel - who were just about to enter a new land, with new people and outside interests, "Pay attention!," Moses said. "Pay attention!" to what holds you together as a nation...as people of God. Do not abandon the commandment of God to love your neighbor as yourself and hold fast to the teachings that keep your heart in tact and your tongue from destruction." We, too, need to pay heed, to pay attention, to be reminded of what keeps our hearts in tact to do the work that we are called to do... as we enter the "one hundred and sixty-first" year as the body of Christ here, at First Lutheran.

Purity practices were important cultural markers for the people of Israel. Every culture has them. That..is how we know who belongs and who doesn't, who's in and who is outside...*our* cultural markers. But it's a new day with Jesus. We have a bigger table to set. We have neighbors in need. People who need kind words spoken to them. Acceptance for those who may not know any traditions in the church and acceptance for those who do... but simply cannot uphold them. Our everyday, ordinary, decisions about how we treat each other matters in the realm of the kingdom of God. This...this is why Jesus says to the Pharisees and scribes, "You want to talk about tradition? Then let's talk about tradition..."

As we enter a new year in the life of the church and new avenues of learning beginning next week, new projects, new events, new activities, I believe we need to pause and ask ourselves, individually and as a faith community, "What is it that we need to change? What tradition(s) are we holding onto so tightly that it disrupts relationships, excludes others, or creates so much anxiety within us that we wonder if everything all around us is worth it?" How do we choose carefully and care deeply about what traditions bring forth a harvest of righteousness and complete the mission of God?

Jesus was not against tradition. He was against empty tradition, where there was ritual without reality. So...let me ask you... and me... this question: When Jesus invites us to dinner, will we... mind my manners? Amen.