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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16B)

August 23, 2015

Text: Mark 7:1–13

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Traditions are tricky things. They have the power to enrich or impoverish; liberate or enslave. This is true in all areas of our life: civic, domestic, and religious. Imagine inviting friends and family to your house for a traditional Thanksgiving feast only to serve Papa John's pizza. Where's the turkey, cranberry sauce, pumpkin pie? (Cream can today @ St. John's!!) You might get a puzzled look or two. Some might even say a thing or two. And why can't we have Christmas trees on Easter Sunday?

We stand for the pledge of allegiance. Why? It's tradition. Churches have potluck suppers. Why? It's tradition. Pastors wear stoles. Why? It's tradition. All of these traditions have histories and reasons behind them. They connect us to the past while giving guidance for the present and future. They inform who we are, where we came from, and what we might expect in the future. Traditions are wonderful things.

But what happens when they go wrong? When the traditions take on a life of their own, when they cease to serve human flourishing and demand observance for their own sake. That's where things are with the Pharisees and scribes in today's gospel reading from Mark 7. They saw something that absolutely scandalized them, that shocked them beyond belief. Look at their question in vs. 5, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" Notice that. Jesus, you're not keeping the traditions. What's the big idea? You're a teacher of God. And you don't even know how to teach your disciples how to act?

The tradition that the Lord's disciples broke was eating without washing their hands (vs. 2–4). That's it! To our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears, this sounds almost ridiculous. Parents make their children wash their hands before meals for hygienic reasons, not religious. Get rid of the germs and the grime. But washing hands as an act of religious devotion just seems silly.

But according to vs. 3, such a good practice was in keeping with the traditions of the elders. One has to wonder where this tradition began? No one seems to know these

days. Could its beginning have been as simple as parents teaching their kids to wash their hands before supper? There's no command in the OT for God's people to wash their hands except one. I'd like to read it to you. It's from Exodus 30:17–21:

<sup>17</sup>The LORD said to Moses, <sup>18</sup>“You shall also make a basin of bronze, with its stand of bronze, for washing. You shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it, <sup>19</sup>with which Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet. <sup>20</sup>When they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to burn a food offering to the LORD, they shall wash with water, so that they may not die. <sup>21</sup>They shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die. It shall be a statute forever to them, even to him and to his offspring throughout their generations.”

Now that's a pretty serious command. Wash your hands and feet lest you die!! But this command was only for the priest and only when they were to minister at the altar in the tabernacle. It did not apply to God's people in their daily lives. It didn't even apply to the priest's daily lives, only in that one instance.

Ok pastor. This lesson in OT law and Pharisaic traditions is all interesting and all but how does it relate to me as a NT Christian? Vs. 6–8, is the key:

<sup>6</sup>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; <sup>7</sup>in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ <sup>8</sup>You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”

In other words, it's more serious than eating with dirty hands; it's about serving God with outward actions – with washed hands, with all the right words, with all the right external actions – but with an empty, ritualistic heart that could care less about true faith or true love and devotion.

What God desires, according to Psalm 51:17, is a broken and contrite heart. That is, the Lord of mercy and truth delights in a heart that seeks mercy and truth, forgiveness and grace, not the empty observance of traditions, rules, and regulations.

The Lord Jesus even gives a real life, concrete example of a human tradition used to trump a commandment of God. The example He gives centers on the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment, “Honor your father and your mother” from Exodus 20:12 and then a commandment related to it in Exodus 21:17, “Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.” The underlying purpose of these commandments is to love, honor, and

cherish parents and by extension, all legitimate authority. It's really pretty simple. Love mom and dad. Obey them when you're young. Honor them when you grow up. And take care of them as they age. One word sums it all up: love. By loving them, you love God. It's as simple as that. By extension, we honor, cherish, protect, and support all legitimate authority. They are servants of God for your good as Romans 13 teaches.

However, the traditions of the elders allowed for an exception to God's commandment. Jesus describes it in vs. 11–13:

<sup>11</sup>But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, "Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban"' (that is, given to God)—<sup>12</sup>then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, <sup>13</sup>thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do."

Rabbinic literature allowed for a man to dedicate something to God by calling it "Corban." And this was a binding oath removing the thing dedicated from its common, ordinary use to an exclusively sacred function. The thing now belongs to God. Even if that meant property or money or whatever resource that should be used to help take care of a man's parents in their need. Practically speaking, it meant that a man's mom and dad could go hungry or homeless in the name of God and with God's blessing! All because the son stupidly uttered the irrevocable word "Corban." Sorry mom and dad, I can't help you eat today or tomorrow or next year even though I have this stash of cash because, well, it's "corban" and I can't use it for ordinary things like buying you food.

This kind of thinking honors God with our lips but keeps our hearts far from Him. For He desires that we show love and mercy rather than legalism and dead ritualism. Love for parents is more important, a far more holy act of worship, than making a huge donation to church. That might seem a bit strange coming from a 21<sup>st</sup> century preacher. We've become so jaded by the televangelists who say the opposite. Give to the church first, or rather, give to my ministry organization first, and then God will take care of you, your family, and give you a larger financial portfolio to boot. I tell you the opposite today. If the offerings you give today mean that your parents or your children or your neighbor must suffer what they need, then take care of them first in God's holy name. Do not give your offering. Show God's love to those who need it and to whom God has already commanded that they should receive it. Rejoice in the

free gospel of grace and mercy and know that His love is being shared through your love.

Our Lutheran tradition teaches that traditions, no matter how good and worthwhile, cannot replace the gospel of the Lord Jesus. The Lord's gospel teaches that sinners are saved from eternal judgment only because of what Jesus did in His death and resurrection. Faith alone in what Jesus did for you and me and the world is what saves a sinner and gives peace that surpasses all human understanding.

Article VII of the AC, our chief confession of faith says, "For the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree about the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies instituted by men, should be the same everywhere." Christ's gospel has the priority, not traditions. And then again in AC XV we hear, "[God's people] are also taught that human traditions instituted to make atonement with God, to merit grace, and to make satisfaction for sins are opposed to the Gospel and the doctrine of faith. So vows and traditions concerning meats and days, and so forth, instituted to merit grace and to make satisfaction for sins, are useless and contrary to the Gospel." Anything that takes away from the teaching that God loves sinners for the sake of Jesus must be abandoned. No "Corban" exceptions allowed.

Washing your hands before eating is a good tradition. Using pulpits, offering plates, hymnals, vestments and stoles, pews and candles, and worshiping on Sundays are all great church traditions. But they don't earn you the forgiveness of sins or eternal life. Jesus earned those things for you and He gives them freely to us by grace. That's a God-given tradition that's worth keeping.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.