



Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN!

Now that our series of bread discourses in Mark's Gospel are finally over, we have one of my favorite weeks in the Lectionary B year. I call it "tradition". Something many of you might not know about me is that I love musicals. I played in the orchestra when my high school did a musical each year and I fell in love. Those wonderful songs that told a story by Learner and Lowe, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Meredith Willson, and Jerry Bach. I loved them all, but today I think of Jerry Bach and his most acclaimed work, "Fiddler on the Roof". How many of you have seen "Fiddler on the Roof"? I saw it last at the Fireside Theatre in Fort Atkinson, about a year before we moved to Park Falls. In the opening scene you hear the famous music being played by a fiddler on the roof of a house. Then Tevye walks in and is talking about the fiddler. He goes on with his monolog and says that although it is difficult to scratch out a living, we stay in Anatevka our home because of TRADITION. Can't you just hear him say TRADITION! He goes on saying that because of our traditions, we keep our balance for many, many years. And he explains that we have traditions in Anatevka for everything: how we eat, how we dress, and even whom we marry. Tevya continues by saying that tradition is how we show our devotion to God. And then he says, "You may ask, how did this tradition start? I'll tell you - - I don't know. But it's a tradition. Because of our traditions everyone knows who he is and what God expects him to do."

So, traditions for Tevye were very important even though he did not know why or where they came from. He felt that they were important. Tevye was a religious man, in that he kept traditions even when they did more harm than good.

And that is exactly what our Gospel text is all about this morning. Following traditions even when we don't know why we follow them. Following them instead of following God's ways. And that's how tradition can get us in trouble.

In the church, tradition can become just doing what we have always done because that is the way we have always done it. It is very much like us Lutherans wanting Setting 1 or 2 from the old Green Hymnal every week. It feels good, it is comfortable and therefore it must be the way to do it. After all it was really Lutheran.

Centuries ago, Moses got 2 stone tablets inscribed by God and brought them down off the mountain. They contained the 10 commandments, and those 10 commands were to be the law of the people. Do you remember what those 10 laws were? Well, I won't ask you to recite them now, but do you recall one being about washing your hands before you eat? Nope. Don't think so.

Well somewhere along the way in Jewish customs, washing hands prior to eating got to be a tradition. It was a ritual that actually had little to do with disease or good hygiene. In fact, Louis Pasteur will not discover germs until the 17th century. Even then, he had a difficult time persuading physicians to wash their hands before performing surgery. Yikes! So, it is fair to say that people of the 1st century have no understanding of hygiene. It was a man-made tradition or law that became part of what they thought showed good religion or faithfulness to God.

In our Gospel reading today, hand washing became the question that the leaders asked Jesus. These Pharisees wanted to know how Jesus could allow his disciples to eat with dirty hands. "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders but eat with defiled hands?" they ask. Jesus answers them using a prophecy from Isaiah. Jesus uses this Isaiah writing to shed light on their hypocrisy. Jesus then says to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition". Our reading then picks up again at Jesus' strong words to the Pharisees, "Listen to me all of you, and understand there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defiles."

So yes, Jesus just put a big fat hole in their tradition. Tradition is not all that important. Jesus continues to annoy these Pharisees because to him tradition is not what is important. Now don't get the idea that you don't have to clean your hands before dinner. Well, not exactly what is meant here. We know it is prudent to wash our hands and our food especially with all the bacteria we know about today and its effect on us. But Jesus' warning is not about hand washing.

Do any of you remember all the warnings or rules that your parents taught you. If you sit too close to the TV, you will get cross-eyed. You cannot go swimming for 30 minutes after eating or you will sink. If you don't eat your veggies, you won't grow up strong. All possibly good ideas and all warnings to create some fear so you don't do them. But nowhere in the 10 Commandments do I remember any of them except, my favorite, "Honor your father and mother". Those rules were followed because we did respect our parents. Not to mention being fearful of what might happen if we did not listen and obey. (It was a different time?)

Well, that is how the Pharisees ruled. They made stacks of rules to make sure that the people were busy complying with them and afraid to break them. They became convinced that they would not be the chosen ones if they did not follow all the rules of religion. They would not be good Jews. This fear that the Pharisees held over their head was how they motivated them to do things they wanted. And no wonder that Jesus was feared by the Pharisees. He broke their rules, their traditions, one after another. And the Pharisees knew that they would have no power against him and could not control what He did or said to their people.

Jesus was simply telling the Jews, that it is what is in your heart that is most important. Having a clean heart is much more significant than if you wash your hands before eating or any other manmade rules or traditions. And if your heart is hardened, evil will come from it. It is not about what you eat, what goes into your stomach, but it is what is in the human heart. So, nothing we eat or how you cook it, can affect our heart. Even those spicy foods that give us "heart burn" and make us turn to Roloids, Pepcid, or Tums. That sort of heartburn is really only a digestive problem, not a real heart issue.

Mark tells us in this passage that God sees that we are unclean and have become sinful not by what goes in but by what comes from our hearts and out our mouths. Yes, evil does come from human hearts. Jesus clearly recognizes this fact and tells us in this Gospel lesson. A lesson here for the Pharisees and for us. In fact, Jesus lists many things that can come from an evil intention of the heart, "fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly". These are the things, Jesus says, that defile a person.

Our other readings also affirm Jesus' position of the heart. Our Psalm reminds us to do what is right and true from your heart. James says, that if we deceive our heart our religion is useless. And in Deuteronomy Moses tells the lesson, "You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you".

Remembering how we have spent the last 5 weeks talking about Jesus being the bread of life, we know the good news, that Jesus came to give us bread to eat, a kind of bread that goes not to our stomachs but to our hearts. It purifies our hearts, no matter whether our hands are clean or unclean. Jesus pours His new wine into our hearts so our old hearts will be transformed.

And today that will happen again at our Communion banquet. Jesus invites us to come and eat. Come with clean or dirty hands but just come. Come with hearts that have on occasion brought forth evil. He will feed us with his bread and the new wine of the Gospel. Here, He will purify our hearts. Here Jesus will work to create in us a clean heart. And we will leave here with a transformed heart and good things will come out of that new heart.

It will be good for all people. We leave this sanctuary with new energy, a renewed spirit to go out into the world to BE DOERS OF THE WORD as today our James reading commands. We are not to go out and DO tradition, but to go out into the world and love and care for each other. Be like Jesus and care especially for the least, the lost and the lonely. And hopefully doing God's work in the world and sharing his love in a world that so desperately needs it, will become a new tradition for you!

This week I have read so many stories of churches having fights over what color the carpet is going to be in their sanctuary or how to do Holy Communion and as I teach the children in Confirmation class, that is all adiaphora. None of it matters. The only thing that does matter is that we come to church to worship our God and to feast of His Holy Meal.

We are to have a heart that seeks God and His way of living love. And more good news here; we do not have to do that alone. The Holy Spirit that was implanted in each one of us at our baptism is there to help. He works in our heart to help us want to do God's will. It is like getting a free heart transplant whenever we ask. Renewed our hearts want to partner with God to be his hands in the world. And by doing this we can change that ugly list I read of undesirable attributes Jesus warns us

against, but rather to have a new more favorable list of fruits of the spirit we find in Galatians 5: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Sounds more like what God wants for our lives, doesn't it?

Jesus came to earth to show us the way. To show us how to love one another. He did not come to teach a great big set of traditions. Jesus is not concerned about clean hands. Jesus is not concerned about traditions of those that have gone before us. Jesus is only interested in our hearts. His father sent him to earth to break down all the barriers and to touch human hearts. He is prepared to meet us in love, a love that is so strong it does surpass all human understanding. God loves us so much he sent His only son to die for us. With that kind of love surrounding us, we should have no hardened hearts. Being loved like that we should all desire to go out and be doers of the Word. With our thankful hearts we should sing God praises.

God is not looking for just our obedience. Nor does he want us to perform a few religious rituals or traditions for their sake alone. He wants us, all of us: heart, mind, and soul to love Him as he loves us. God wants to be in a loving relationship with us. He wants our faith to be only in Him for all time. A faithful loving heart lets us experience the joy of following Jesus Christ.

And this morning one last story I heard several years ago. It may sound all too familiar to you.

Two young newlyweds were preparing to enjoy their first baked ham dinner in their new apartment. After taking the ham out of the plastic and setting it on the cutting board, the wife chopped off both ends of the ham with a knife. She tossed the two small ends in the garbage can. "Wait a minute," said her new and mystified husband. "Why did you do that? Why did you just cut off the ends of the ham and throw them away?"

"I don't know. My mother always did that," answered the wife. "Maybe it helps bring out the flavor." Unsatisfied with this answer, the husband called his mother-in-law. "Can you tell me why you cut the two ends off a ham before you cook it?"

"Well," said the mother, "I'm not really sure why. That's just the way my mother did her ham, and it was always delicious."

As soon as he hung up, he called his wife's grandmother. "Grandma, we have an important question for you. Can you tell us why you cut the ends off a ham before you cook it?"

"Oh yes, my dear," answered Grandma in her quiet, thin voice. "I cut the ends of the ham off so it would fit in my pan."

And that is all it takes for tradition to come between us and God. It is indeed that easy. Yes, some tradition is necessary. Tradition helps define who we are. But we cannot let it get in the way of what is really important. Hearts ready to love and be loved by Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.
AMEN