

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

I'd like to share a story told as a slightly long conversation between a husband and wife as they sat in church waiting for the service to begin. It was in one of the commentaries relating to today's gospel reading:

"It's just wrong," Melanie whispered. "He needs to take off his hat in church." John looked up from reading the Sunday bulletin. "Who has to take off his hat?" His wife responded, "That young man." She pointed to the other side of the church. "He's up there near the front." "Henry? That's not a hat, he's just changed his hair color again." John shook his head. "I swear that lad changes the color more than I change my socks."

Melanie sighed. "You need new glasses. I don't mean Henry but to the left of him." "Oh, the one with the Yankees cap?" "Yes, him. He shouldn't have the hat on." "Why?" John pointed to a woman sitting two pews in front of them. "She's wearing a hat even if it doesn't have a ball team logo on it." Melanie crossed her arms, "You know what I mean. She's a woman. Women are allowed to wear hats in church." "Why is that?" John asked, "Because women need to have their hair covered to not distract men?" John rubbed his chin. "If that's the case, then why aren't hats required for all women?" "Don't be obtuse," Melanie said. "Women can wear hats if they want but they don't have to wear a hat. It's the modern age." John smiled, "I've got the feeling there is a 'but' coming."

"Young men need to learn that it is disrespectful to wear a hat in church." Melanie scowled. "It just isn't done." John picked up the pew Bible and thumbed through it. "Why not? I don't remember Jesus ever giving any commandments about hats." Melanie retorted, "You know what I mean." John replied, "No, I don't. I do know that when you and I were young that girls wore dresses and hats and gloves to church and boys wore shirts and ties." He gestured at the assembled congregation. "Yet I see girls in slacks with no gloves or hats and boys in t-shirts and jeans. Yet you have no problem with any of that."

"Why should I have a problem with that? Young people don't dress up like we used to when we were their age." Melanie paused and looked at her blouse and at John's polo shirt. "The truth is we're not as dressed up as our parents were at our age." "No argument from me," John smiled, "I'm actually relieved to not have to wear a tie on Sundays. I can remember sweltering in a jacket and tie when we were younger." "That's true." Melanie shook her head. "It just bothers me to see a boy with a hat on in church."

John took a moment and watched the boy laughing with his friends near the front of the church. "I don't recognize him." His wife responded, "I saw him come in with Marty and Sally Johnson. I think he's a friend of their Fred." "Ah, so we're seeing newcomers in church. That's a great thing." John tilted his head to one side. "So do you still want to tell him to take off his hat?" Melanie looked at the boy for a moment and then sighed. "No. I want him to be here. I want him to be listening to the pastor and coming to know Jesus."

"Why the change of heart?" her husband asked. Melanie looked over at her husband, "The longer we talk, the more I realize that 'no hats for boys' is really a rule we made up that isn't part of the gospel, "I don't like boys keeping their hats on in church, but I realize it's my problem and not his." John put his arms around her. "Why don't you and I go and talk to him?" Surprised, Melanie retorted, "What? I told you I didn't want to say anything to him about wearing a hat in church. I want him here in the building and I want him to feel welcome." John got up and offered Melanie his hand. "Then how about we go over there, introduce ourselves and say that to him directly."

Melanie thought for a second and then smiled. "Okay, you got me. That is exactly what Jesus would want and you know what? I'd like that boy to know people in this church aren't old people who grumble about young people." John rolled his eyes as they started down the aisle. Together John and Melanie went to see the young man and to let him know that he was welcome among the congregation that morning just the way he was (<https://www.sermonsuite.com/contributor/peter-andrew-smith>).

I once had a youth in my youth group who was treated exactly the opposite. Dane, a leader of the congregation, didn't like that a young man had worn gloves in church, he especially didn't like that they were gloves with the fingers cut out. He went up to Joe and gruffly said, "We don't wear gloves in church." Joe obediently removed his gloves however, when Joe left that Sunday, he never returned. It isn't difficult to recognize which of these people acted in a more Christian manner.

When the person offending you hasn't actually done anything more than break a tradition, gone against something you think is more important than what it actually is, is that showing the love of Jesus to someone who may never have been near Christians before?

Jesus was pointing out to the Pharisees and scribes, who had travelled over 80 miles in order to challenge him, that some traditions aren't as important as they believe them to be. And Jesus said, "You put aside God's command and obey the teachings of men." Jesus is making a startling and definitive point here. He tells them that their quasi-religious rituals have replaced their relationship with God. Like many, they are slaves to tradition. Jesus is saying that God's love always comes before ancestral laws; that his new law of love written on the heart is always more important than traditions.

Jesus is not saying that ritual cleanliness is bad or wrong in and of itself. Today we practice sanitary measures. Jesus says the problem is not in their actions but in their hearts, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." The point Jesus is making here is: what is unfriendly to God is when ritual cleanliness is considered more important than God's love and mercy and compassion. Jesus put mercy before tradition; he would like us to show God's mercy as well. So the problem Jesus addresses with the Pharisees is their stiff-necked adherence to statutes they had made up by intertwining their own cultural rituals with the Ten Commandments. They turned the 10 Commandments that God had given them into so many religious laws people couldn't help but become entrapped by them. The Pharisees passed these laws from generation to generation, and no one knew where the laws came from. In doing so they robbed people from having a right relationship with God.

What Jesus is addressing with the Pharisees is the difference between religious traditions and relationship. The word religion is from a Latin root meaning to keep on repeating the same ritual. The Pharisees had religion. They did the same actions repeatedly and without considering the meaning of those actions. Christ, on the other hand, invites us into a relationship with his Father and himself and others, just as Melodie and John began to build a relationship with the new boy in church to help him build a relationship with Jesus. Relationship is a connecting or binding experience that joins people as though they are one. Jesus invites us to bind our heart to his heart that we may be one for the Father's glory. Not because of us or what we have done or not done. But because of Christ and what he has done for us through his life, death and resurrection.

All glory be to God.