

Bound By Tradition – August 30, 2015

Mark 7:1-23

Rev. Rachel A. Wann

Having been raised on a steady diet of Broadway musicals, any time I hear the word “tradition,” I can’t help but think of the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. The setting is rural Russia, at the turn of the century about the time of the Russian Revolution. The story centers on the lives of a poor Jewish family, and one of the themes of the show is the importance of religious tradition to an orthodox Jew.

The main character of *Fiddler on the Roof* is a Jewish patriarch named Tevye. He and his wife Golda have three daughters of marriageable age. The plot of *Fiddler on the Roof* is a simple one - finding suitable husbands for these daughters with the help of the local matchmaker. The traditional means of finding a spouse for a child was a meeting between the parents and the matchmaker and settling on a deal. However, the girls wanted to choose their own husbands. Times were changing. Traditions were beginning to fall apart. For the oldest daughter Tzeitel they had what appeared to be a perfect match for such a poor family. The local butcher was the richest man in town and had a fondness for Tevye’s oldest daughter. However, the butcher was an old widowed man, rather portly and certainly not the dream match for a teenaged girl.

In fact, Tzeitel was already in love with a young man, a tailor, who was quite poor. Despite their fear, the couple approached Tevye and professed their intent to marry. Of course, he fumed and fussed. Grumbled that, since the dawn of time, fathers have chosen the husbands for their daughters. Didn’t they realize were messing with tradition? How dare they fall in love with each other. It’s the father’s responsibility to find a match. But he was an old softy, and seeing how much in love they were, he gave in and gave them his blessing. But mumbling all the while, “Traditions – they’re all starting to change.”

Then came the second daughter. Again she bypassed the matchmaker and fell in love with a Jewish soldier. A similar confrontation occurred with her father, but after much ranting he finally gave in, gave them his blessing, and watched as she left her hometown to be with her husband in Siberia. Indeed traditions were beginning to crumble.

The third daughter came along. She too had found her own match. He too was a soldier. But he was a Bolshevik soldier, a Russian. He was not a Jew. The worst thing that could ever happen to a Jewish family would be to have a child marry a Gentile. When the young couple came to Tevye to announce their intentions to marry, he could not give in this time. No daughter of his would marry a Gentile. He refused to acknowledge them, refused to bless their marriage, and after kicking her out of the house, declared her dead to him. Though he loved her dearly, her name was never again to be mentioned in their home. On this tradition he could not bend.

Our lesson this morning from the gospel of Mark has to do with tradition. It is about a confrontation between some scribes and Pharisees and Jesus. The Pharisees were sticklers on religious tradition, and they sought to live lives of purity. They believed that every aspect of their lives should exhibit holiness. The Pharisees weren't really bad folks, they just had a tendency to look down on those who weren't as pious as they were. They could be rather self-righteous, and over time, the Pharisees had adopted certain traditions in order to "build a fence" around the law, so that the law itself would never be violated.

These traditions, these human-made precepts, began to take on more weight than they actually deserved. It got to the point that the breaking of a tradition was tantamount to breaking the law of God. They pushed tradition too far.

The scribes and Pharisees had a concern regarding the actions of some of Jesus' disciples. Apparently they had eaten some food without first washing their hands. The issue here is NOT one of personal hygiene. Priests were required to perform a ritual washing of their hands before eating, but nowhere in the Scripture was it ever required of lay people. However, devout Jews, like the scribes and Pharisees, had begun to take up this practice themselves, and eventually this hand-washing ritual became an unwritten expectation for everyone. It became part of the tradition of the elders.

So the scribes and Pharisees were upset that Jesus' disciples neglected to follow this tradition of the elders, and so they confronted Jesus with their concern. They had become so enmeshed in their traditions of piety that their biggest concern was on outward appearance. They had lost the true meaning of the law. The purpose of the law was to bring them in into relationship with God through ritual practices and then guide their interactions with others. It was never intended to be a laundry list of do's and don'ts. Pastor John Jewell writes, "They were more concerned about outward appearances than with inward appropriation of the faith. They were knowledgeable about the content of the law but ignorant about the condition of their hearts."

<http://www.lectionarysermons.com/sep.03.00.htm>

Jesus recognized this failing in them when he quoted the words the prophet Isaiah and called them a bunch of hypocrites, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines." They pay lip service to the commands of God, but they don't practice them in their daily living. Instead they set up human traditions over against God's commandments. They had created a system of rules, regulations and traditions to be followed for outward piety. But in their hearts, they were ignorant of what God really demanded from them – to love. To love God and to love fellow humans.

Outward expression of religious practices became priority over inwardly based devotion. Matters of the heart – love, justice, and mercy - were neglected in favor of outward appearances. And this isn't just an affliction of the Pharisees. How many Christians suffer this same malady? So much of what people see and hear about Christianity is more about the supposed rightness of what one believes rather than the compassion and love that one is to show others. They know the words, but do the words mean anything?

We get to the point where we're just going through the motions. Worship becomes tainted, routine, useless. Following traditions becomes more important than the true worship of God. And if you don't do things the right way, or if you don't subscribe to our traditions, then something must be wrong with you. This results in divisive thinking - "us versus them." And it develops into other ways of isolating ourselves from one another. If you don't look and act like we do, then you don't belong here. And pity the poor soul who comes in and tries to change things.

Jesus took this whole issue a step further. He claimed that externals – the traditions, the false piety - weren't the real problem. What came from inside one's heart was the problem. In his teaching to the crowd and privately to his disciples, Jesus remarked that a person isn't defiled by what they take in, such as by eating. Verse 14 reads, "...there is nothing outside a person, that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." The Jewish Law proclaimed certain foods to be unclean and they were not to be eaten because they would cause the body to be unclean. Pious and proper Jews avoided anything and anyone considered to be unclean.

The point that Jesus made here is that it's not about external things that cause a person to be defiled. Defilement comes when one's heart is already tainted. Defilement is evident when one harbors attitudes of hatred, prejudice, lust, anger, greed, and intolerance. Defilement occurs when one acts on those inner inclinations of the heart. Jesus lists several. People commit certain acts when their hearts are already defiled, including fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. These actions that persons commit are a direct result of evil intentions of the heart. What defiles a person is not what they eat but what they do. And what they do reveals the inner attitude of their heart.

C.S. Lewis gives an example that when a person loses his or her temper, our first inclination is to say, "Sorry about that outburst, but that other person really ticked me off and provoked me to anger.

What they said or did really got under my skin, and so I just lost it." We'd rather blame what is external, the other person. Lewis claimed that most of the time that external provocation is not what makes you an angry person in that particular case. Instead it reveals you as the angry person you generally are. The anger doesn't just show up when someone provokes us. It's there in our hearts all along. (Illustration from the Calvin Seminary Website, lectionary study)

In this passage Jesus isn't trying to overthrow the law. To Jesus, piety is one thing, but personal ethics – way more important. He's not saying that the purity laws are invalid. He's saying that showing love is the greater good. These purity laws extended to avoiding contact with certain people – sinners, lepers – those people considered to be the outcasts of society. Jesus had dinner with sinners. Jesus touched lepers. Jesus healed the woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years. Jesus touched a little girl who was dead and brought her back to life. Jesus was surrounded by unclean people, but he did not avoid contact with them. The focus of Jesus' message of good news is about matters of the heart, not rules of piety. When rules and traditions get in the way of doing and showing love, and of welcoming the stranger into our midst, then there's a problem.

At the end of the movie Fiddler on the Roof, due to the upheaval of the Russian Revolution, many of the Jewish families, including Tevye and Golda, were fleeing to America. The house packed up, the belongings stowed on pack animals and carts, the final goodbyes were being exchanged. And seemingly out of nowhere, the youngest daughter and her Gentile husband came forward to say goodbye. Time had passed, perhaps his anger had cooled. Maybe somewhere in his heart, he could bypass tradition, and he could find it in his heart to bless his child and her husband. Maybe there was a chance for peace between them.

Tevye was a man caught between deep emotion for a daughter he loved and the desire to follow his traditions. He wrestled inwardly. Finally he made his decision. He turned his back on them, and bent to his work in brokenness and in grief. He gave no blessing, offered no peace.

Tevye was a good man. He loved God and he truly loved his family. But he loved his tradition more. He believed it was more important for him to follow the command that Jews do not marry Gentiles, then to follow the command to show mercy and love and to offer forgiveness. (illustration idea http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_b_traditions_GA.htm)

In our gospel story from Mark the scribes and Pharisees were more concerned with their rituals than for carrying out God's fundamental commandment of showing love and mercy in a hurting world. The more they focused on their outward actions – traditions, following the letter of the law – the less they were concerned about their inner motivations. They thought outward appearances were what counted. But Jesus gave a different message. It's what's in the heart that really matters.