

**“Matters of the Heart” – September 2, 2018 – Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23**

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The word tradition is one of those words that may evoke a variety of images in our minds when we hear it. You can find traditions in individuals, families, communities, and in organizations. New traditions are born all the time. As we head into football season, I know that teams and fans have a variety of traditions that they carry out throughout the season. In fact I can remember way back in high school, if our football team won the game, the marching band would wear our hats backwards after the game as we marched back to the school. When new students would ask why, no explanation was ever given except that it was tradition.

This coming Tuesday morning, many of you with kids and a camera will carry out another more recently established tradition. Anyone know what that is?  
(the obligatory back to school photo that gets posted on Facebook)

Our families all certainly have their own traditions. Your family may have particular ways to celebrate birthdays or other holidays. Sometimes we don't even know why we do things. We only know that it's always been done that way. Heaven help the family cook who tries to alter the expected Thanksgiving menu.

Churches have their own traditions. Sometimes I think traditions start as habit. We get comfortable with a particular way of doing something, a routine begins to form, and without warning, a tradition has begun. A very simple example would be the seating arrangement in the sanctuary. Next Sunday you will all gravitate back to your particular spots. You all sit in the same place every week. I can tell who is not here because there is an empty spot where you normally would sit.

And don't you dare even think about sitting in someone else's pew. New visitors to churches are often faced with the dilemma of where to sit. While there is certainly no assigned seating, if you make the mistake of sitting in the wrong pew, you could be faced with an hour of hostile glares and muttered comments. Now, all kidding aside, some traditions are good. But other traditions can have negative consequences. You have heard the phrase, "We've always done it this way." That is the death knell for any kind of change, even positive change.

Our lesson from Mark's gospel is about tradition. The text portrays a confrontation between some scribes and Pharisees and Jesus. The scribes were experts in the Jewish law, and the Pharisees were a specific sect of Judaism that emphasized following the temple regulations for purity in their daily lives. They did this believing that all parts of their lives should be holy. The Pharisees weren't really bad folks; they just had a different standard for personal piety. This could and often resulted in a self-righteous attitude. Their emphasis on ritual purity in all things became a tradition for them, even though it was not mandated by scripture.

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 equivalent to breaking the law of God. And this is where legalism, or legalistic interpretation of God's law, becomes extreme.

The scribes and Pharisees were upset by the actions of some of Jesus' disciples. Apparently they had eaten some food without first washing their hands. Now this is where it gets tricky – the concern they had was NOT about personal hygiene. It was about ritual purity. Only 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, pious Jews, like the scribes and Pharisees, had begun to take up this practice themselves, which is fine. But later it became an unwritten expectation for everyone. It became an unbreakable tradition.

Because the disciples ignored this tradition, the scribes and Pharisees were angry and confronted Jesus, their teacher. They saw these disciples as uncouth, and that reflected badly on Jesus. But here's the problem. These people put so much emphasis on their pious traditions, they forgot the intent of the tradition in the first place. They were more concerned about "looking righteous" than being righteous. And to them, Jesus' disciples did not look righteous. The scribes and Pharisees lost the true meaning of the law and were worried more about outward appearances. The purpose of the law was to bring people into relationship with God through ritual practices and then guide their interactions with others.

Jesus saw through their righteous indignation. He recognized them as hypocrites and quoted the prophet Isaiah, saying, "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 certainly knew how to "talk the talk" about following the commands of God, but they neglected to "walk the walk." They emphasized following human traditions over against God's commandments. They followed a system of rules, regulations and traditions which showed only a surface level piety. But underneath the façade, 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 so-called Christians suffer this same malady? They may look holy. They can recite the prayers and creeds. They know when to stand up and when to sit down in worship. They can sing all the verses of Amazing Grace from memory. They claim to love God, but in the same voice they spew hatred toward others. They quote scripture out of context to support any of their misguided vitriol.

They cover up their fear and disgust of others by wrapping themselves in all the right trappings. They go through the motions of saying they love God, but their hearts are tainted by the misguided traditions of humans. Instead of welcoming the stranger, they lock the stranger out. Instead of

sharing the good news of God's kingdom of welcome, they spew propaganda of conformity and exclusion. 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 and intensifying the divisions between people. If you don't look and act like we do, then you don't belong here.

So Jesus got to the true heart of the matter. He said that the traditions and the false piety weren't the real problem. What came from inside one's heart was the problem. Jesus stated that a person wasn'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 types of actions expose a heart full of evil intentions. What truly defiles a person is not types of food they eat but what they do. And what they do reveals the inner attitude of their heart.

In this passage Jesus isn't trying to overthrow the law. To Jesus, piety is one thing, but personal ethics – that is much more important. He's not saying that the purity laws are invalid. He's saying that showing love is the greater good. The Jewish purity laws required one to avoid 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 made it a point to make contact with unclean people; he did not avoid 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.

In our lesson from the Gospel of Mark, the scribes and Pharisees showed more concern for carrying out their rituals than for following God's fundamental commandment of showing love and mercy to others. The more they focused on their outward actions – traditions, following the letter of the law to the point of excluding others – 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.