

Sermon – Proper 15 – St Mary’s Lake Ronkonkoma

Matthew 15:10-28

Six years ago this month I commenced my theological studies at The General Theological Seminary in Manhattan. It was the first time that I had ever lived in community and the first time I had attended a learning institution that was almost 200 years old. I embraced the experience and immersed myself in the culture and traditions of General. The traditions of the institution, drawn heavily from the great English universities, informed daily life. When I would ask, “Why do we do this or that?” I was told, “because, that is the tradition.” In some instances it made no sense but that was the tradition.

Tradition, like institutional culture, shapes much of what we do in our lives. Often we are completely unaware that it is shaping the things we do and think. In today’s gospel we first hear about how tradition shaped the way the Pharisees lived their lives. The Pharisees’ faith was shaped by the Torah and by the tradition of rabbinical teaching that defined every aspect of a pious Pharisees’ life. Where the Torah was silent the Rabbi would issue a ruling that would define the right way to attend to a particular issue. This helped the community move life out of the grey and into a more defined way of living.

In the first part of today’s gospel reading, the Pharisees are concerned that the disciples of Jesus had eaten without washing their hands. This act in their understanding defiled them and made them impure. Jesus refutes their understanding saying that it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles but what comes out of the mouth. The Pharisees we hear were not pleased with this interpretation. Jesus response is that he sees them as blind, and by the continued teaching of their tradition, they are making others blind too.

Peter was steeped in the tradition of the elders and sought clarity from Jesus, unsure of the true meaning of Jesus’ statement. So Jesus explained. What we eat goes through us, but what we say comes from us, from our hearts. It is the things we say that can defile us if they come from a heart of evil intention. The tradition of ritually washing one’s hands before eating does not defile the person. Therefore the tradition can be ignored without an impact on people’s standing before God.

In the second story the intent of Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite women is less clear. Jesus traveled away from the heavily Jewish area around Gennesaret to the predominately gentile areas of Tyre and Sidon. As he travelled we hear that this Canaanite women came up to him and shouted at him that her daughter had been cruelly tormented by a demon. Jesus ignored her. His disciples got annoyed by her and encouraged Jesus to dismiss her. Jesus seems reluctant when he says he has only been sent to the lost sheep of Israel. As a gentile and a women she seems far from the people Jesus was seeking to save. The pious Pharisees seem to be more suited.

This women though expresses a faith in Jesus that the Pharisees lack. Calling Jesus “Lord, Son of David” she acknowledges Jesus rightful place and shows him that she indeed has faith in him to cure her daughter even though she is an outsider.

“Lord, help me” she pleads. Jesus appears in his reply to stick to his mission aims, that is to help only those ‘lost sheep of Israel.’ Jesus then seems to relent and offers this curious statement. “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” The dogs, a defiled animal, represent the gentiles and the children’s bread represents the food needed for the lost.

The women’s faith leads her to the creative retort that even the gentiles deserve to be fed by the Lord, just as the lost sheep of Israel. The women’s faith is resolute. She withstood the delayed response of Jesus and persisted. She then creativity sought Jesus’ attention to her plight. Her faith was rewarded and her daughter recovered. This women has found her own relatedness to God, a path opened for her by Jesus actions. We know that the kingdom of heaven is achieved through the process of inner growth into wholeness and creativity with God, not by rules and regulations that diminish our moral imperative.

Many people of Jewish faith accepted Jesus’ teaching that equality was possible and that Jews and gentiles could feast together. Many though refused to accept anyone as equal that did not follow the laws and traditions of the faith. They shunned the other and eventually drove Jesus to the cross. These people could not see the flaw in their logic and they let tradition trample upon the moral and ethics of Jesus’ teaching of God.

In this country today, and in many other countries around the world, civil unrest exists because some in our communities refuse to accept that each person is a valued creation of God and that we are all invited to sit together at the banquet table of life. The images from last weekend in Charlottesville were extremely disturbing. One of the many troubling parts of last week was the brazenness of the white nationalists moving out of the shadowy wings and onto the main stage. In so doing they are drawing in young people radicalized by online forums that are filled with divisive language that seeks to claim the moral high ground.

The rhetoric of the white supremacists is that only whites should sit at the table. They use the language of Christianity to underpin their actions. Matthew Heimbach, a white nationalist leader said on ABC’s 20/20 program on Friday night that his group was “Doing the Lord’s work.” This is folly.

Much has been written about last week and the rise of these hate groups. One quote caught my attention as an insight into the heart and mind of a white supremacist. It was from a 55 year old man named James Zarth, a member of the KKK. He said, “I noticed something was wrong decades ago. Usually [TV shows like Andy Griffith, the Brady Bunch and The Little House on the Prairie] where shows with a Christian moral.” He went on “But now that the Jews own the majority of the media stations, they’re showing things that are against God’s law, like race mixing and homosexuality.” Pointing to the diverse population in the US as a source of violence he continued “we advocate for living separately within America. We are a benevolent, fraternal, Christian, white civil rights organization. We are for family and for God. We see our race and our heritage going away and being harmed by intermixing with these mongrel races. It has to stop.” What indeed comes out of the mouth defiles!

There appears to be a fear in these people that they will be consumed by a changing world and that possibly they will become a minority at some stage. Their hate stems from a fear of becoming 'the other' of society and a fear that they could end up facing the same discrimination that they seek to force upon others. There is a fear of a loss of status and privilege.

Their perceived tradition is that the white man is superior to all others. This tradition plays a significant part in these peoples lives. They feel it has always been that way and they want those traditions to remain. They claim the high moral ground by associating their stance with Christianity and God as if they hold a deep faith in Jesus and God.

Tradition plays a part in all of our lives, both privately and in our church. Tradition after all is one of the three tenants of Anglicanism proffered by Richard Hooker – Faith, tradition and reason. Tradition however has always sought to be balanced with faith and reason. For the white nationalists, tradition seems to be most important which corrupts faith and reason.

What we are seeing now is another attempt to resurrect these traditions of hate, divisiveness and oppression. In a way it is good that it has come to light again because as a nation we have to confront these issues as they seek to divide us and drive vulnerable people into the arms of these divisive separatists.

When we were baptized, and more importantly when we each committed to personally follow Jesus, we started down a road of inner growth. Part of our inner growth is not only learning the ethic of Jesus, but also confronting our shadow sides. It is after all our shadow sides acting out that require laws and regulations.

As we seek a deeper relationship with Jesus we have to do a certain amount of unlearning. Traditions that might exist within your family or your community have to be examined to see if they conflict with Christian ethics. When we accept Jesus as our savior and as the way, the truth and the life we accept that we have to learn to see the world through the lens of a new ethic. This may at times bring us into conflict with those close to us. However this is the important witness we need to give to the good news of Jesus.

The Pharisees sought to create a rule for every aspect of life. They encouraged a life fixated on a tradition of following the rules. In doing so they maybe unwittingly absolved themselves of the need for individual moral confrontation. The Canaanite women however appears to have confronted her inner self and found within her being a faith in the man Jesus Christ.

The church today must stand up against all forms of unhealthy tradition especially when those traditions create division in our society and in the church. We must acknowledge our shadow sides and work on our inner growth with Jesus and Christian ethics at the center. We must remain vigilant to the evil that is at the root of the white supremacist movement and counter the hate at every opportunity with respect for one another and love for God's creation.

Amen

