

Sermon – Proper 17 – Ascension, Rockville Centre, NY

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

I like to wash my hands before I eat and I always wash my cups and dishes after cooking and eating a meal. I don't ever wash them before a meal though. I also wash most of the fruit or vegetables I buy before I consume them. When I do these things I don't have a religious purpose in mind rather it is personal hygiene. I just don't want to get sick or to make any person sick.

The Pharisees in today's gospel story might have had similar thoughts when they washed their hands and dishes, but for them there was a strong external religious force that had ritualized the actions and had given each action a religious meaning. Purification in Judaism was and continues to be an integral part of their physical and religious lives. Regulations and over two thousand years of rabbinical teaching shape these actions today.

In my house when I was growing up if I failed to wash my hands before dinner I might have had the wrath of my mother or father fall upon me but I wouldn't have been banished from the house and forced to undertake a purification ritual to make myself right before God before I could eat.

Jesus addresses the crowd and the Pharisees that have followed him and criticized him for not enforcing the purity laws around eating. He points out to them that it is necessary to have the right perspective on life and especially religious adherence to law and regulation. He cites Isaiah "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." They put human tradition above God's commandments.

If the focus of life is anxiety about adhering to all of the religious regulations then our hearts become fixated on the ritual and not on the spirit of God's commandments. Fixation on adhering to regulations can make someone somewhat robotic rather than the freedom someone experiences whose religious practices come from the heart.

Human tradition and the rules and regulations that form around tradition, and strengthen tradition, seem to be part of our human DNA. We seem to love tradition. The traditions that have built up around Thanksgiving seem quite well defined, especially to an outsider such as myself. The traditional turkey, candied sweet potato and brussel sprout dinner is not to be messed with. The meal defines the celebration. Let's not also forget the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade.

We can make a tradition out of just about any circumstance so long as someone continues to value the particular practice and encourages others to go along with it. Traditions form over generations as particular practices are handed down. Our churches are strong at developing traditions but sometimes they are so particular to a parish they confuse and alienate visitors.

Tradition, along with scripture and reason are the cornerstone of the Anglican Church. Richard Hooker, a late 16th c English theologian defined the threefold sources of authority in

Anglicanism as scripture, tradition, and reason. These three sources uphold and critique each other in a dynamic way. Scripture is the normative source for God's revelation and the source for all Christian teaching and reflection. Tradition passes down from generation to generation the church's ongoing experience of God's presence and activity. Reason is understood to include the human capacity to discern the truth in both rational and intuitive ways. It is not limited to logic as such. It takes into account and includes experience. Each of the three sources of authority must be perceived and interpreted in light of the other two.

Roman Catholicism is often critiqued for being too centered on tradition and Protestantism is often critiqued for being too centered on scripture. Hooker wanted Anglicanism to be the via media, the mean between the extremes.

The tradition of the Church also has a kind of practical priority, because tradition summarizes the reasonable interpretation of scripture by the many ages of the church that have gone before us. Anglicans historically have believed that the great weight of the Christian tradition is a reliable guide to the mind of Christ and to the proper interpretation of scripture.

Tradition is not simply a body of writings or ideas. The praying and worshipping church is the context for all theology. The grace-filled liturgy, the grace-filled prayer of Christians, and the grace-filled lives of the saints, from the days of the apostles to the present, are the broader tradition within which the creeds and councils occurred and still are held.

When Thomas Cranmer crafted the first Book of Common Prayer in 1549 his aim was to provide a liturgical tool to assist congregations understand the liturgy in English. The BCP is some 470 years old and it remains at the heart of our Anglican faith. Its use is very much a tradition of our church.

The key difference between human ritualized traditions and faith traditions is one of focus on God. The tradition of Thanksgiving might have started as a God centric practice but its connection to God seems to have largely evaporated. It seems much more of a secular tradition than Christian. The tradition of using the Book of Common Prayer is God centric. It enables us all to participate in common worship of God. It helps us pray and it helps us to focus our worship rather than allow worship to become human centric, or worse priest centric.

The tradition of using the BCP is also grounded in scripture. It is in scripture that we find the commandments God gave to the Israelites and now to us so that we too might follow God and build strong communities of faith. When I was growing up I remember each Sunday the minister would recite the ten commandments. The congregational response to each commandment was "incline our hearts to keep this law." The clear emphasis is that our hearts must be attuned to the commandments to keep us on track.

The Ten Commandments given by God to Moses are the framework of life. They define our relationship with God and with each other. If we live by these commandments our hearts will be inclined toward God and keeping God's law. We will become very aware of our hearts, and our actions that might defile us.

If we ignore God's commandments we dissolve the reference point of our community living. Within the inevitable void that follows, the human heart will want to define its own rules and regulations for living. These rules will bend towards us rather than toward our God. This is the slippery slope that Jesus raises with the crowd in today's gospel.

There is also an important reminder we can take from the Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy. When we adhere to the Law the community will be strengthened. Not only will they be strengthened but also they will be distinctive. The actions they take will show their wisdom and discernment, and other communities will take notice. The community will be seen as just, wise and honorable. The community also has a responsibility to teach its young ones how to live under the Law and how they too will become just and honorable people by following the Law.

God's purpose for Israel is that it develops into a community that is a distinctive embodiment of God's justice, thereby giving witness to surrounding nations. At the heart of a just society is hospitality and holiness - hospitality to the stranger and holiness toward God. These two characteristics make a God-centered community distinctive from idolatrous communities.

The church communities of today are also called to live as distinctive communities in our world. Our own lives and the lives that we live out as a community have to be God-centric and commandment-centric. We are to be what biblical scholar Walter Bruggemann calls a "contrast society." The wider community watches the church for any signs of hypocrisy. They are quick to judge. As Christians we embody a great sense of responsibility when we live out God's desire for us to be beacons of justice in the world.

A healthy church will continually remind itself of this great responsibility and reflect often on its actions. When we fall as a church, like the fall we have made by the scourge of sexual assault, we must become repentant and we must be seen to change. The greatest sin of the scandal of institutional sexual abuse has been the cover up. The institution was put first ahead of the victims. This was not a just action and many victims have suffered terribly for a second and third time as they fought to be heard.

Our fallen nature is however redeemable and God has given us the mechanism of repentance and forgiveness. Jesus forgave those that were corrupt and put him to death and he forgave those that were blind to justice. We too must live in the cycle of reflection, repentance and forgiveness as we seek to constantly grow in our relationship with God and in God's holy community of the church.

We have been called to great responsibility to be witnesses for God in the world and to be communities of wisdom and justice. What comes out of us comes from our hearts and we need to be careful that we don't defile the community and ourselves by careless actions. We are a "contrast society" and the world is watching us.

Amen