

“When Tradition Turns Deadly ”
Isaiah 1:10-20; Matthew 15:1-9
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A young monk arrives at the monastery. He is assigned to helping the other monks in copying from copies but not from the original manuscript. So, the new monk goes to the head abbot to question this, pointing out that if someone made even a SMALL error in the first copy, it would never be picked up! In fact, that error would be continued in all of the SUBSEQUENT copies. The head monk says, “We have been copying from the copies for centuries, but you make a good point, my son.” He goes down into the dark caves underneath the monastery where the original manuscripts are held as archives in a locked vault that hasn’t been opened for hundreds of years. Hours go by and nobody sees the old abbot. So the young monk gets worried and goes down to look for him. He sees him banging his head against the wall and wailing, “We missed the R! We missed the R! We missed the R!” His forehead is all bloody and bruised and he is crying uncontrollably. The young monk asks the old abbot, “What’s wrong, father?” and with a choking voice, the old abbot replies, “The word was...CELEBRATE.” For those of you who don’t get it, because someone made an error and left out the R when trying to copy the original, they ended up condemning themselves to a life of CELIBACY instead of CELEBRATION.

This joke illustrates for us the danger of using the copies of copies instead of remaining true to the ORIGINAL, of working off patterns of OTHER patterns and never going back to the PRIMARY one which is the standard against which others should be tested. Well that’s what this morning’s scripture lesson is all about, to remind us what IS essential about our faith and what happens when we rely on tradition TOO MUCH. Here in Matthew chapter 15, the Scribes and the Pharisees complain to Jesus that his disciples have been eating without first washing their hands, that they skipped the ritual cleansing as laid down by their tradition. Many animals were deemed “unclean” such as camels, badgers, rabbits, and hogs, and anyone who touched one would be LIKEWISE considered “unclean.” The ceremonial cleansing that removed the uncleanness was not prescribed by the written Law, that is the Law of Moses as spelled out in the Old Testament, but was introduced MUCH LATER by religious authorities to become part of the tradition of the elders. By the time of Christ, there was a vast body of such traditional lore- a man-made ORAL TRADITION that eventually gained EQUAL authority with the WRITTEN LAW. This ORAL law was an accumulation of various opinions and interpretations made by scribes to cover situations not explicitly mentioned in the WRITTEN Law. Transmitted by word of mouth from one generation to the next, it was eventually regarded no longer a body of mere opinions and interpretations but an ACTUAL PART of the original Law which had been given to Moses on Mount Sinai and then orally transmitted to the elders who then faithfully transmitted them to successive generations. Thus, there grew this huge body of man-made laws and codes which actually had nothing to do with the Mosaic Law but given EQUAL STATUS with it nonetheless.

Jesus doesn’t really defend his disciples, nor does he condemn the Pharisees for their

ceremonial cleansings. Rather, he takes their man-made traditions and turns them AGAINST them by showing how in their effort to obey their own codes and precepts, the Pharisees ALSO transgress- they break the COMMANDMENT OF GOD which is an even GREATER transgression. While they are mainly concerned about outward observance, God is only interested in INWARD cleansing, that is, in one's INWARD holiness. Their tradition is not of God but of MAN and he proceeds to give them an example of just how hypocritical they are. In fulfilling the Sixth Commandment, to honor one's father and one's mother, one was obligated to not only respect and obey his parents but to provide for them materially in their old age. However, one could get around this obligation by swearing upon his death to deed his property and savings to the temple. Because his money would be specifically earmarked for the priests, he was then absolved from having to care for his father and mother and any other family members with it; his vow to the temple superceded any responsibility he might have to his parents. Jesus was pointing out that this man-made law--one solely intended to benefit the temple and its clergy--is made irrevocable while the commandment to honor one's parents--the only security a parent could depend upon, a law which God himself had inscribed on the stone tablets given to Moses--is conveniently set aside. Thus they promoted personal greed over that of a matter of justice; they elevated their own man-made traditions over that of the Word of God. Our lesson instructs us here that there are GOOD traditions built on the solid foundation of the scriptures and the words and work of Christ himself, and then there are BAD traditions which are based upon human opinion and interpretation which are often self-serving and self-aggrandizing--those were the traditions Jesus was always warning against. When tradition takes precedence over the needs and concerns of people, when servile obedience to dead laws and empty precepts becomes more important than demonstrating how love and grace and forgiveness operate through them, then religion has become sick, even DEAD.

The essential point for Jesus was made clear in his statement that the Law was made for man and not man for the Law. As important as tradition may be at times, it can only remain healthy if it serves the GREATEST commandment laid down by Christ himself, the one he said which summed up the Law and the prophets: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself." THAT becomes the test by which we must evaluate all our traditions- does it help us to love GOD AND NEIGHBOR, or does it foster WALLS AND DIVISIONS between us?

A marvelous example of what happens when tradition becomes an ends in itself and is no longer a means towards helping one to understand and appreciate GOD is the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. The main character, Tevya, is a milk man who is a devout husband and father of six; they all live in the small Russian village of Anatevka. What has bound them together throughout years of oppression and persecution has been their "traditions," a point Tevya sings about over and over again throughout the play. Without ever really understanding WHY tradition was the way it was, he, like the rest of the villagers, knew it was something he had to follow, had to hold onto and instill into his daughters. In the prologue, Tevye tells the audience:

Because of our traditions, we've kept our balance for many, many years. Here in Anatevka, we have traditions for everything: how to sleep, how to eat, how to work, how to wear clothes. For instance, we always keep our heads covered and always wear a little prayer shawl. This shows our constant devotion to God. You may ask, how did this tradition get started? I'll tell you. I

don't know. But it's a tradition. And because of our traditions, every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do.

In Anatevka, the villagers seem to be unaware and unconcerned about why they adhere to their traditions. They just follow them as a matter of convention.

When Tzeitel, Hodel, and Chava—Tevye's three daughters--become old enough to marry, their tradition tells them that their papa chooses who his daughters marry while the town's match maker, Yenta, assists in identifying eligible men. But as time goes on, it seems the daughters have developed other, more MODERN ideas as the tradition of relying upon a match maker to find one's spouse begins to seem less enticing to them. They recognize that the world around Anatevka is changing and that some customs considered normal are beginning to be obsolete. Therefore, all three of them put up a determined fight when choosing who they want to be with. Forsaking their tradition, they yearn to find someone to marry ON THEIR OWN.

Tzeitel is the first daughter to rebel. She has fallen in love with her life-long friend, Motel, and has made a pledge to marry him. Tevya is adamantly opposed to his daughter's wishes, having already set Tzeitel up with a wealthy old butcher named Lazar. However, he reluctantly agrees. He ultimately concedes to her wishes and grants Tzeitel and Motel his approval.

The next to dissent is his second daughter Hodel, who falls in love with her liberal and worldly teacher, Perchik. Not only do Hodel and Perchik end up getting married without it being arranged, they INFORM Tevya that they are doing so, instead of the both of them ASKING FOR HIS PERMISSION. While Tevya is not pleased with what they have done, he eventually comes to terms with it and accepts it AS WELL.

His last daughter, Chava, ALSO has her own mind. SHE has decided to marry Fyedka, the most radical decision OF ALL. You see, where the others whom his daughters are marrying are Jews, HER person of choice is a GENTILE. a NON-Jew. In his fury, Tevya bans her from the family and declares her dead- he must retain SOME respect for the traditions, foremost among them that Jews can only marry Jews. But once again his heart is tested and it eventually wins over his commitment to tradition. In the interest of his daughters' happiness, he is eventually forced to change his views and standards. Like THEM, he TOO comes to recognize that the world is changing and that adjustments are in order to maintain our values and our relationships. The lesson he has to learn is that as important as tradition may be, it is ultimately trumped by THE FORCE OF LOVE, that when choosing their husbands, the three girls have chosen LOVE OVER TRADITION every time.

The fact is that many traditions which start out as good can easily become BAD traditions when they devolve into "traditionalism." Historian Jaroslav Pelikan has defined traditionalism this way: "TRADITION is the living faith of the dead while TRADITIONAL-ISM is the dead faith of the living." Traditionalism is preserving traditions for the sake of the traditions themselves without any connection to the source that originally inspired it. The traditionalist is always in danger of living IN the past rather than BY the past. When an idea becomes frozen into a form, it then becomes so easy to think more of the form than the idea. Sooner or later convictions fall into a pattern, and then we fall prey to worshipping the PATTERN rather than the

CONVICTION.

Now tradition possesses a deep and intrinsic appeal for us all. The truth is that we like tradition because it makes us feel comfortable and secure. It remains our one true connection to our past- to not just when we were children but to the many centuries that preceded us as well. Every Sunday, we return to this familiar sanctuary, to our familiar pew, to hear the familiar organ playing the same old familiar hymns, to recite the familiar prayers and to listen to those familiar themes of love and forgiveness and grace once again preached from the very same pulpit and we love the familiarity of it all. While everything all around us is changing as rapidly as next year's fashions and automobile models, it is the one place we can come and experience something of permanence, isn't it.

It's not an easy thing to accept change because it can be so destabilizing, so discomforting. For instance, baseball fans, including myself, have not exactly been happy with some of the rule changes that have recently been instituted, especially how extra-inning games are now conducted. Last month, the baseball czars passed a sweeping set of new rules scheduled to go into effect for next year, including the implementation of a pitch clock which will limit the time between pitches to no more than 15 seconds (or 20 seconds if there's a man on base), banning defensive shifts, restricting pickoff attempts, and expanding the size of the bases- all to hasten the game's pace and increase action because TOO MANY fans today feel the game has become far too long and much too boring. The reality is that at present, baseball is the least popular it's ever been with only a little more than 10% of Americans saying it is their favorite sport to watch. Personally, I have to admit that I have a hard time recognizing the game anymore, that I find myself LONGING for the days when pitchers used to bat for themselves and thus there was no need for a designated hitter, when managers weren't throwing challenges and then waiting ten minutes for a little man in a video booth hundreds of miles away to tell us whether the player was really out or not, and when people could attend an actual double header and get to see two games for the price of one. But those days are now gone forever which means we must either ADAPT to the new rules or find an entirely NEW sport to enjoy on those cool spring days and hot summer nights.

Yes, change causes one to move out of his or her security zone into an area that can be stressful and full of risk. If you don't believe me about how people respond to change, how would you feel if I asked you all to suddenly get up and move from your old familiar seats which you've ALWAYS occupied on Sunday mornings and sit in some unfamiliar pew in another part of the sanctuary, next to someone whom you've never seen or met before. When I was the pastor of Old First in downtown Waterloo, Iowa, there was the story of when a former minister cordoned off the upstairs balcony and forced the usual crowd who occupied it to come down and sit with the rest of the congregation, on the first level. These people became SO upset, several of them threatened to leave the church if he ever pulled such a stunt again.

Over time, traditions can become SO routine that we don't even think about what it is we're doing- that they almost become like a reflex. For instance, have you ever noticed that when we walk through the sanctuary door on Sunday mornings, we automatically self-segregate, that is, we immediately take a seat among old familiar faces, with long-time friends instead of seeking out some fresh face who is all alone and then introducing ourselves to that person. Now

there's nothing wrong with friends sitting among friends- it may be the only time of the week you see each other. But then, imagine what happens when someone NEW comes into our church service—a visitor perhaps or maybe someone who strolled in looking for some assistance--and no one notices or EVEN CARES that they're here. The fact is that we do such things almost unconsciously that we're never even aware we're doing it. We develop a comfort zone among certain people and places that becomes very difficult to move out of unless we find ourselves forced--just as this past week's hurricane has done--into NEW patterns, NEW configurations with people we didn't expect to know and sometimes didn't even WANT to know.

You see, we can keep our Christian lives safe and secure and just limited to those persons who think like us and share the same values we do- that's what tradition can do to a person if we never get BEYOND it. But then, we wouldn't BE the church, would we? Rather, we'd be just another club, no different than any lodge or service organization except with a little organ music thrown in. The fact is that our natural inclination is for a COMFORTABLE religion- one that requires minimal commitments and few sacrifices and makes little demands upon us. We want a religion that won't intrude upon the business of life, one which doesn't challenge the ethics with which we conduct ourselves in our homes and at our jobs the rest of the week. We want to be able to show up on Sunday mornings and know we will consistently hear warm-hearted messages on love, joy and peace from preachers who don't step on our toes, from pastors who leave us feeling good and never guilty. Tradition can provide us with ALL those things if it's only THAT we want. However, keep in mind that the last seven words of a dying church are "but we've never done it that way."

The fact is that the Christian life demands so much MORE from us. It calls us to appreciate the traditions that have been passed on to us with all the familiarity they bring, but THEN it asks us not to get STUCK in them. We need to understand that if we never get beyond the traditions of the past, we end up missing something FAR MORE important- the thrill that comes when we step out the box and take the risk of broadening our experience that comes with trusting God. Hence, tradition is at its best when it reminds us who we are as the People of God and inspires us to see ourselves as part of a great community of faith wide enough to cross every continent and traverse every age.

Now I began my sermon with a joke to illustrate the danger of using the copies of copies instead of remaining true to the ORIGINAL, of working off patterns of OTHER patterns and not going back to the PRIMARY one- the standard against which all OTHERS should be tested. We must always compare our traditions against the touchstone established by he it was who FULFILLED the Law and all its righteousness- JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF. Pure and simple, for Christ, that standard WAS and must ALWAYS BE rooted in love. That's why when other churches, stuck in the concrete of three thousand years of tradition, insist that women shouldn't be ordained as ministers because that was not how it was done 2000 years ago, or when they argue that a women's role is to always be quiet in church while subservient in the home because that was the pattern back then, we can respond by showing how Jesus regarded a woman to be every bit as competent and talented as any man and should be RESPECTED AND TREATED as such. And when churches, stuck in the muck of three thousand years of tradition, insist that two persons who love each other—albeit of the same sex--are nothing but "sinners" and should be EXCLUDED from the Church, we can once again point to how Christ came to teach us that love

EXCEEDED the Law, demonstrating once and for all how HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS were the essence of religion and no longer any of our dead traditions. Let us pray...

Holy Spirit, guide us to encounter the LIVING GOD, revealed to us in Scripture AND Tradition. Help us to RECEIVE God's Word, passed on to us through this great deposit of faith, and be NOURISHED by it so that we, in turn, may PASS IT ALONG to others. In Christ's name we pray, amen and amen.