

Tradition and Change (II)
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Text: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

A Jewish friend told me a story about tradition. During a service at an old synagogue in Brooklyn, when the prayers were recited, half the congregants stood up and half remained sitting. The half that was seated started yelling at the others to "sit down!"—and the ones standing yelled at the seated ones to "stand up!" The rabbi, learned though he was in Scripture, didn't know what to do. The leaders suggested he consult one of the founding members of the congregation—a 98-year-old woman living in a nearby nursing home. So the rabbi went there with a representative of each faction of the congregation. The one representing the "standers" asked the old woman "Isn't the tradition to stand during prayers?" She responded, "No, that is not the tradition." The one representing the "sitters" then asked, "Isn't the tradition to sit during the prayers?" She answered, "No, that is not the tradition." Then the rabbi pleaded with the elderly woman, "But the congregants fight all the time, yelling at each other about whether they should sit or stand...." She interrupted, exclaiming, "THAT is our tradition!"

Well. The synagogue does not have the corner on that market! We in the Christian Church and at Fairmount understand the conflict potential of tradition-- especially if we ignore it, mess with it, or heaven help us, change it. It's not hard to see why: social scientists will tell you that human beings need tradition to feel secure. Repeated rituals, historical memory, rules and practices all bring a sense of order to community life; tradition confirms group identity and values. Attempts to change the "way we've always done it" create dis-equilibrium and threaten group stability. So we teach our tradition to children, our worship is orderly and follows a pattern, and we carefully consider changes and try to communicate the reason for the change thoughtfully.

But tradition can also become a barrier to growth, an immovable wall that stops innovation in its tracks. There's a reason why the change-squelching complaint--- *we've never done it that way before* ---has been called "the seven last words of the church."

The New Testament narrative of Jesus' ministry provides a study of tradition and change, because almost from the beginning Jesus was perceived as a threat to sacred tradition. Accounts of the conflict between him and the

religious leaders go a long way in revealing the content *and spirit* of his teaching, and today's gospel reading is no exception. Here the authorities confront him directly about why he and his group flaunt the rules. Listen for God's life-giving Word in the reading from the gospel according to Mark, selected verses from the seventh chapter.

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

What did Jesus have against handwashing?????!

The purity code of ancient Israel reflected a deeply spiritual concern: how unholy people could stand before a holy God. Washing the hands as one sat down to eat and cleaning utensils and dishes that held food became ritual acts, a symbolic way to show respect, humility, and even worship. All that washing certainly had some healthy side effects in an age that knew nothing about germs and communicable disease, but its primary purpose was not hygiene, but as an expression of faithfulness to God's covenant. So the religious leaders' pointed questions to Jesus about his followers tucking in to lamb shanks and humus without a bowl of water in sight aren't about health but about religion—and the requirement to walk in the paths of righteousness for God's name's sake.

So what did Jesus have against handwashing?

I was considering this gospel text in a week when we received information about public health precautions in light of concern about H1N1 (formerly known as the "swine flu") virus. Handwashing heads the list of preventive measures. The handwipes in your bulletin today are meant to call attention to its importance, and to other steps we'll take to do all we can to maintain a healthy environment. You'll find antibacterial soap and handcleanser in the restrooms, we'll learn to pass the peace without shaking hands in the height of flu season, we'll minimize contamination in the way we receive communion, and everyone will be encouraged to stay home when symptomatic.

What did Jesus have against handwashing? Nothing. His strong retort to the religious leaders' implicit accusation was not about the practice *per se*, but the spirit in which it was done. Jesus let the exchange provide a teachable moment for a point he would make again and again against the priority of outward forms over inward intent; about choosing rules over righteousness, and human traditions over divine commandments. He calls the Pharisees by the name that even today is leveled at those who loudly proclaim one way but live another way: *Hypocrites!* Pretenders! Actors playing a role. Jesus' severest critics were those of the religious community; and similarly, his most vehement challenge was toward them, and surely it was because of what was at stake. Human traditions can obscure and distort God's truth. Hypocrisy negates our

ability to live with authenticity and reduces us to majoring in the minors, or what author Walker Percy called “getting all A’s and flunking life.”

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day made a serious miscalculation about what is important to God. They all too eagerly substituted ritual for relationship, tradition for true obedience. As our church thinks about preserving the best of tradition as well as seeking creative change we have to wonder about the ways we persist in doing the same today. Do we, for example, enforce a subtle dress code appropriate for worship? Have we dipped and blessed one way to worship, one style of architecture, one kind of music, one set of expectations around keeping our religion private and internal? Have we never had “discussions” about the right wording of the Lord’s Prayer or the right way to pass the peace? Jesus warned the religious leaders that they were abandoning God’s commandments in favor of human tradition. What he meant was that they were using these peripheral issues to dodge the heart of faith. When external practices become more important than the reasons behind them—to love God and love God’s people—when etiquette substitutes for ethics--then we too are in danger of settling for less than the authentic and abundant life Jesus came to show us.

What did Jesus have against handwashing? Nothing! What did he have against tradition? Nothing!—unless it becomes a substitute for the real deal—a vibrant, growing relationship with God and a faith community that demonstrates its faith through acts of kindness, compassion and justice.

Look, friends, tradition is not the way we always do things (or the way we “never do things!”). Tradition is composed of the values we draw upon as we do things, values we express in worship and in ministering through faith formation, service and mission, friendship and caring. Values such as seeking excellence and superior quality in all we do. Values such as understanding our church as a vital part of a larger community and appreciating diversity. Values such as nourishing a thinking faith instead of one received without question. Understanding faith as larger than self-interest; that God is working through us, not simply for us. Those are some of the values I see that form and inform our “tradition,” and since it’s not our tradition to say “amen” out loud, I am very interested in hearing from you later about whether they match your list. Finally, we are to worship and serve God alone; our values must be grounded in God’s life-giving grace Jesus embodied in his life and ministry.

One of the weeks of my sabbatical was spent in Atlanta, Georgia where I attended a churchwide event called “The Big Tent.” Picture some five thousand Presbyterians coming together from all parts of the country, with different perspectives across a broad theological and social spectrum. Worship was amazingly rich, using a variety of worship and music styles. An

African-American drum group, interpretive dance by Korean women, classical music and traditional hymns accompanied by organ, new hymns and praise choruses accompanied by guitars and marimbas, flutes and brass and yes, kazoos (“Make a joyful noise” we were reminded). We heard powerful preaching by a woman seminary professor, a Pakistani-born pastor who ministers in an urban church where many of the members are immigrants, and a fourth generation Presbyterian pastor who walked around the chancel as he preached, amplified with one of those over the ear “rock star” mikes, illustrating his sermon with generous use of photos and images projected on the screens behind him. It struck me in a new way how the outward forms of worship matter far, far less than the spirit in which we give ourselves to it. Even the grousing I heard later from some quarters didn’t cancel out what I knew in my heart: that we had worshiped God in spirit and in truth. . . .even if not in unison. In fact the name of the event “The Big Tent” was intentionally chosen to reflect the breadth of our church’s welcome to diverse persons, some who call themselves “traditionalists” and others who might say they were innovators, part of the emerging church. Friends, none of these descriptors can be identified wholly as our sacred tradition. I’d like to think instead that the Presbyterian tradition worth claiming and preserving is represented in a big tent, an inclusive welcome, thoughtful worship of the sovereign God with all that we are—and all who we are.

So now we stand at the threshold of a new program year, one that has been thoughtfully planned and that is eagerly anticipated by your staff and leaders. In this year you will experience both the comfort of the familiar as well as the challenge of the new. The Fairmount I cherish and am committed to cultivating with you builds on tradition and risks innovation, responsive to God’s call to every generation in this complicated postmodern culture. . . .

. . . .to do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly with our God.

Friends, let us seek to grow this church, relying on both the roots of our past and the wings of God’s faithful, lively Spirit carrying us into a bright and hope-filled future. Amen.