

August 29, 2021
Lectionary 22, Year B
The 14th Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Tradition!

It was December 20, 1996. It was about 9:30 at night. I was a senior in college. It was my 22nd birthday. And I was sitting on the floor of my bedroom in my parents' house, crying. No, not just crying, sobbing.

Sobbing loudly enough that my mother came into my room to find out what on earth could be wrong with me. So, I told her that I was crying so hard because the Christmas tree, which was always decorated in time for my birthday, wasn't decorated yet.

My mother listened to me very kindly. I'm sure that she probably thought, in her heart of hearts, that I was acting pretty childishly, that I was worked up about something that was really small in the grand scheme of things.

If she had thought any of those things, she would have been right. After all, what difference did it make if the Christmas tree was decorated for my birthday? We didn't decorate the Christmas tree because of my birthday. We decorated it for Jesus' birthday and we still had four days until Christmas Eve.

I mean, I was right that it always had been our tradition to make sure that the Christmas tree was decorated before my birthday, but there was nothing set in stone about it.

My mother could have told me what she might have been thinking, that I was being ridiculous, that I needed to pull myself together, that I needed to

act my age, that the heavens wouldn't fall if we decorated the Christmas tree on December 21st, instead of on my birthday.

But she didn't say any of those things. Instead, she had my sister come out of her room, she got my Dad, she turned on some Christmas carols, and at 9:45, we worked on the Christmas tree together. I don't remember if we got it completely finished that night, but I know that I felt a lot better after that late night tree decorating session.

You see, I had been having a tough few months that year. My boyfriend of three and a half years had broken up with me in October and I was still very sad about it.

Before the devastating break-up, we had been talking about getting married. We had been talking about trying to spend time with each other's families for the upcoming Christmas, as part of our hopes that one day we would be part of each other's families.

But then he moved on in his life, away from me, away from my family, away from the things that we had talked about and hoped and planned together and left me in his wake.

In the fall I had been looking forward to a different kind of Christmas that year, but when it came to the actual Christmas that we were going to celebrate, I didn't have anything new to look forward to. All I could hang onto was my traditions. The way it had always been, not the way I had hoped it would be.

I wanted to take refuge in the way that Christmas always had been in my childhood, since I couldn't have the future that I had hoped for. Hence the tears on my birthday about an undecorated Christmas tree.

I honestly don't remember if I explained any of that to my mother or if she just, with the love and compassion and insight of a mother, figured out the hurt and disappointment behind my tears, but I remember feeling loved and supported and very, very, grateful as we decorated our tree late that night.

Traditions can be useful. They can be important. They can give us a framework for our lives, things to look forward to, things to count on. They can shape our time and our families and our communities in deeply meaningful ways. They can bring us comfort and stability and predictability. They can add to our joy in times of happiness and they can give us something to hang onto in times of grief or trouble.

And yet, in spite of all of the ways in which traditions can be valuable, Jesus is pretty hard on the Pharisees in today's gospel reading, just because they questioned why his disciples weren't keeping a pretty simple tradition, the tradition of washing their hands before eating.

Perhaps you cringed when you heard me read that part in the gospel reading. The part that said that Jesus' disciples weren't washing their hands before eating.

After all, many of us grew up with our parents telling us, "Make sure that you wash your hands before you sit down at the table." "Wash your hands before you eat."

We've all certainly spent the last year and half having the whole world tell us, "Wash your hands, make sure you wash your hands, whatever you do, wash your hands."

Hand sanitizer has become ubiquitous.

Hand washing has become something that we're encouraged to do multiple times a day and not just when we eat.

It just doesn't seem that shocking that the Pharisees would expect Jesus and his disciples to wash their hands before eating. It seems like a pretty small ask, a pretty small tradition for the Pharisees to expect Jesus and his disciples to keep, not just for personal hygiene, but also as something that marked them as a part of the covenant community of the Jews.

After all, the author of the gospel of Mark tells us that this kind of hygiene around food is one of the things that sets the Jews apart as a people in the world in which they lived.

He writes as a parenthetical explanation in today's gospel reading:

For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles (Mark 7:3-4).

We know that hand washing is simply one example of good hygiene. Does Jesus have something against hygiene?

We know from Mark's explanation in today's gospel reading, that the rules around cleanliness, that the Pharisees were insisting on for Jesus and his disciples were part of the traditions that kept the Jews distinctive as a people. Did Jesus have something against tradition?

The Pharisees were living in a challenging time. A time when they must have felt that their people's identity as a people was under threat.

They lived under Roman oppression and occupation. The *Pax Romana* under which they lived, was a fragile peace indeed, and could only be maintained by careful compromise on the part of the religious leaders. If there was a breach of that peace, then there would be crucifixions at the crossroads; there could be armies marching on Jerusalem.

Worship at the Temple was complicated, with Roman soldiers in the outer courts and moneychangers in the Temple, exacting a tax for every sacrifice that was offered.

For the Pharisees, who were readers and teachers of the law, who lived out among the people, the safest way for the Jewish people who they had in their care, to maintain their identity, to maintain their faithfulness, was a careful and exacting observance of the laws and traditions of their people.

It's understandable that that was important to them. The Romans might patrol their Temple and tax their sacrifices, but the Romans might not worry about the small things, the domestic things, the things that were done in their homes and families; how they prepared and ate their food, what they did as they entered their homes, how they dressed, their times of sabbath rest, and how they did their work.

So, the Pharisees saw it as their role to maintain and even to police the traditions of their people, clinging to the outward traditions that would mark them as a people distinct from the peoples and races and nations that surrounded them, as the Roman Empire encroached on their land and threatened to overwhelm them.

It doesn't sound that unreasonable, does it?

So why did Jesus have a problem with what the Pharisees were doing. Why couldn't he just tell his disciples to stop what they were doing and wash their hands?

But, of course, that's not what he did. Instead, he kind of "went off" on the Pharisees, saying this:

Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

'This people honors me with their lips,

but their hearts are far from me;

⁷in vain do they worship me,

teaching human precepts as doctrines.'

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition
(Mark 7:6-8)

I'm not sure why the people who put together our lectionary decided not to include the verses that state Jesus' specific complaints against the way that religion was being taught by the Pharisees, because I think that those verses are helpful for us to understand why Jesus was so upset about the Pharisees' emphasis on hand washing.

This is part of what isn't included in today's lectionary, verses 9-13 of chapter 7 of Mark's gospel:

Then [Jesus] said to them, 'You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! For Moses said, "Honor your father and your mother"; and, "Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die." But you say that if anyone tells father

or mother, “Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban” (that is, an offering to God)—then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this’ (Mark 7:9-13).

Jesus focuses one specific example in his complaint about the Pharisees keeping of the law, saying that the Pharisees were themselves or allowing other people to neglect the care of their parents, because they were too busy giving offerings and “keeping the traditions” of the people, rather than showing the compassion, living out the obligations, showing the mercy and love, that Jesus says that God’s law calls them to.

Then Jesus goes on to say, “And you do many things like this” which implies that his concern about neglect of parents is one example of many of the ways in which the keeping of religious traditions were standing between the people showing the justice and mercy and compassion that is the true religious expression that God desires, as we hear in Isaiah 58:

Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,

and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Isaiah 58:6-7)

When we return to our reading for today, we find Jesus once again talking about hand washing, but his point is that we are not spiritually defiled or separated from God by what goes into our mouths, by what comes out of our mouths, by what our actions are. The message is for us to guard ourselves not with the outward signs of religion, but by guarding our hearts, by questioning the motives for and nature of our words and actions, by seeking goodness and not evil.

We have been living in a time of crisis for a long time now. The pandemic, which upended our lives back in March of 2020, and which some of us so unrealistically thought might be over in six weeks or a couple of months, has dragged on and on and on, counted not in days, or weeks, or months, but years. After a brief respite early in this summer, Covid is surging again, disrupting lives, putting people in quarantine, filling up hospitals, filling up graves.

And it has disrupted our traditions at a time when we need them most. In a time when fear has abounded, in a time when danger has been ever present, when grief has been real and overwhelming, we have needed the comfort of our community and have yearned to be able to gather in ways that are comfortable and familiar. In a time when the world seems to be spinning out of control, it is understandable that we yearn for the predictability of the schedule and routine that has guided our community for

years and that has served us well. Because the pandemic hasn't been the only disrupter of our peace in these months, these years.

There is a racial reckoning going on in our country that calls into question many of our traditions and institutions, and that even calls for a reexamination of our history in the light of so many people's lived experiences and for a reexamination of our own hearts.

There is a climate reckoning going on in our world today as we hear last summer, this summer, about fires raging in the west, about heat waves that claim lives in places that are completely unprepared for soaring temperatures, about storm after storm battering islands and coasts and flood waters rising and washing away homes and communities and lives.

These past weeks and certainly last Thursday, have called us to remember, as it comes to an end, the war in Afghanistan which has gone on for 20 years and which prior to last Thursday, claimed the lives of 20,666 American service men and women, and has injured and maimed thousands more, and has also claimed the lives of probably uncounted numbers of Afghan civilians. And of course, last Thursday, those numbers grew with the Isis K terrorist attack at the airport in Kabul, which killed 13 more American servicepeople and at least 95 Afghans and injured more than a hundred Americans and Afghans.

The news that surrounds us is worrying and heartbreaking and makes our own daily burdens harder to bear as we face the struggles of our own lives, with health concerns and financial concerns and relationship concerns, and even just the day in and day out challenges of keeping our regular lives going, even when things are going well.

This is a time when our traditions would really serve us well. And yet, rising Covid numbers are keeping us from a full expression of those cherished traditions, the “back to normal” some of us long for so much.

But instead of just “going for it,” going back to the way things were for the sake of the traditions that we love, we are reminded by Jesus’ words in our gospel reading for today, that our traditions are not the full expression of our faith. The full expression of our faith is found in generosity, compassion, mercy, responsibility, and love of neighbor. Those are the traditions to which we are called through Jesus’ words today, and throughout the biblical record.

So, in service to the new way that Jesus once called the Pharisees and his disciples to, and that he calls us to through the words of today’s gospel reading, we will pass on some of our beloved ways of doing things so that we can continue to love and serve our neighbors, our communities. And as we have learned throughout challenging time, Jesus is with us, leading us through this time of trial, and Jesus will always be with us, giving us joy in new ways, meeting us in new ways, and surrounding us with the love, mercy, and compassion, that he calls us to show our neighbors. It’s not easy, but is it faithful.

And, we will, in fact, wash our hands, because that is a way of loving our neighbor too. Amen.