

Sermon: Tradition!
Text: Mark 7:1 – 23
Date: August 30, 2009 AM
Place: Jesup First UMC

And so Tevya says: *“And how do we keep our balance? ... That I can tell you in a word ... tradition. Because of our traditions, we’ve kept our balance for many, many years. Here in Anatevka, we have traditions for everything. ... You may ask: how did these traditions start? I’ll tell you ... I don’t know, but it’s a tradition.”*

A few years ago, I experienced one of the highlights of my ministry; I was asked to preach at St. James CME Church in Laurens County. And after I preached, the pastor stood and said: *“Now, we’re going to share Holy Communion together.”* And down the center aisle came four ushers. One was carrying the plate of bread; one was carrying the cup. Now, I was familiar with that, but on one side was an usher with a big basin of water and on the other side was an usher with a stack of white towels. And I thought: *“Oh my goodness, we’re about to wash feet.”* And then, the pastor walked over and washed her hands in the basin and dried them on a towel. And she told me to do the same thing. Well, I was intrigued; so, after the service I asked her why we did that. And I expected a great theological – or at least a very practical reason – and she said: *“I don’t know; it’s just a tradition.”*

Tradition! Disobey God ... quench the Spirit, but don’t break the traditions. That’s what Mark is getting at in our text. One day, the religious leaders came to see Jesus and saw His disciples eating with dirty hands. So they asked Jesus: **“Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat**

with defiled hands?” And Jesus confronted them with a quote from Isaiah: *“These people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me. They don’t obey me anymore; they merely keep the rules of men.”* And then, He corrected their understanding of uncleanness: *“It’s not what goes into a person that makes you unclean, but what comes out of a person’s heart.”*

Jesus seems to be saying there’s a difference between tradition and true religion. There’s a difference between keeping the rules and having a relationship. There’s a difference between worshiping God and worshiping a tradition. And the Pharisees just don’t seem to get it.

Now, before we come down too hard on the Pharisees, let’s try to understand their side for a moment. In the 6th Century BC, the Jews returned from exile in Babylon to a time of great religious fervor. They had had 70 years to contemplate the reasons for their demise. And they decided that it was their own disobedience and rebellion that landed them in Babylon. And so, they stood in Jerusalem as Ezra read the Law and with one voice, they dedicated themselves to keeping the Law. And the leaders even signed an agreement.¹ But it shouldn’t surprise you that they were long on promises and short on obedience. And so, it wasn’t long before Israel was up to her old tricks again. And because of this, a group of men came together and dedicated themselves to the highest standards of purity and obedience to the Law. And to make sure they kept every zot and tittle of the Law, they established an

oral tradition around the Law so they'd be sure not to break it. And these men were called the Pharisees.

Now, there is a very big argument that the presence of any form of religion in Israel in the First Century can be contributed to the Pharisees. They weren't all bad; they were just misguided. And many of Jesus' struggles with them revolved around their oral traditions. For example, they disagreed about the washing of hands. Now, the Law required hand-washing, but the Pharisees took it to another level. They required a person to pour a certain amount of water on the hands while holding the fingers upward, allowing the water to run down to the wrists. Then, you rub your palms and the back of your hands. Then, you poured more water on your hands with your fingers pointed downward, allowing the water to run off of your fingertips.

You see, this was about more than cleanliness; this was about religion ... tradition! And Jesus called them on it; He said: "*You leave the commandments of God and hold fast to the traditions of men.*"

So, what would Jesus have us see in this text that might help us in our Christian journey?

Well, first, I feel compelled to say a word about the benefits of tradition. There is nothing innately wrong with tradition. In fact, tradition can be a good thing. ***Tradition Can Give Us A Common Identity.*** Because the church is made up of many different kinds of people, from different places, with different backgrounds and experiences, traditions can bring us

together and form us into a family with a common identity.

Traditions Also Help Us Tell A Common Story. The movie, Avalon, is the story of a family of immigrants who came to America in the early 1900s. One brother came and worked hard to bring the second. And they worked hard to bring the third brother and then they all worked hard to bring their father over. And the heart of the family was their family meetings which happened around the holidays. And at every family gathering, someone told the story and it always started like this: *“I came to this country in 1914 ...”* and so the family story was passed from one generation to the next. This was the reason for Israel’s Passover Feast. It’s a tradition that creates a common story.

Traditions Also Ground Us. They give us a place to come home to. They make us feel at home; they make us feel comfortable. What would our holidays be without family gatherings, without traditional meals, or without the family rituals? There can be a lot of upheaval when daddy isn’t there to carve the turkey anymore. Like Tevya said: *“Without tradition, our lives are shaky, like a Fiddler on the Roof.”*

You see, traditions aren’t always bad; in fact, tradition can be a very positive thing.

But there is also a lot of danger involved in following traditions.

Traditions Can Be An Escape From True Religion! Jesus hints at that when He said: *“These people honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.”* In other words, *“They say the right things; they do the right*

things; they follow all the rites and rules, but they don't really know me." You see, it's possible to keep the rituals and not have a relationship. In fact, some people like the rituals better because it frees them from the responsibility of maintaining an intimate relationship with God. And it really looks good to those around you.

Our Traditions Can Also Become A Way Of Controlling People. The Pharisees used the tradition of the elders to keep people in their proper place and to elevate themselves in the eyes of the people. After all, they were "the Holy Ones," the ones who keep the Law. They knew the Affirmation of Faith by heart; they could quote the Lord's Prayer; they knew the secret handshake. And instead of using their knowledge to teach others and help others, they used the traditions to keep others in their place.

Our Traditions Can Also Become A Way Of Quenching The Holy Spirit. The Pharisees were so sure they knew God, how He worked, what He did and what He didn't do and where He was, standing right in front of them. And they were too wrapped up in their traditions to see Him. That's the danger we face, when we insist that things always follow our notion of right and wrong, we sometimes find ourselves in opposition to God and His will.

There is great danger involved in following tradition!

Well, one day, Little Johnny invited his friend Sam to go to church with him. And it just so happened that it was a Catholic Church. And the

Priest came down the center aisle swinging the incense and the boy said: *“What’s that mean?”* And Johnny said: *“Well, that’s incense and that represents the presence of God and the prayers of the people.”* And a little while later, the priest made the sign of the cross on his chest and the boy said: *“What’s that mean?”* And Johnny said: *“Well, that’s the sign of the cross and that teaches us to be reverent and to center our lives in Christ.”* And then, it came time for the sermon and the Priest stepped forward and took off his watch and placed it on the pulpit and the boy said: *“What’s that mean?”* And Johnny said: *“Absolutely nothing.”*

Well, that’s what Tevya was saying in Fiddler on the Roof and that’s what Jesus was saying in our text this morning. “And how did these traditions begin? I’ll tell you ... I don’t know, but it’s tradition.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

¹ Nehemiah 9