

The Word of God and the Traditions of Us

¹ Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, ² they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. ³ (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands, holding to the tradition of the elders, ⁴ and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) ⁵ And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” ⁶ And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written,

“This people honours me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me;
⁷ in vain do they worship me,
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’

⁸ You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”

⁹ And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!” ¹⁰ For Moses said, ‘Honour your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ ¹¹ But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (that is, given to God) — ¹² then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, ¹³ thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.” (Mark 7:1-13 ESV)

This week the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America voted in its Assembly to open the ministry of the church to gay and lesbian pastors and other professional workers living in committed relationships. What is specifically changed is that previously the policy was that gay and lesbian pastors were required to be celibate. The vote was 55% to 45% in round figures – so certainly not 100% either way – and it has further strained relationships with the two other large Lutheran church bodies in the US both of whom look at the ELCA in continuing dismay. I raise this topic not to discuss homosexuality in the church as such but to highlight that the issues and fights that Jesus had with the Pharisees are still well and truly present in the church today (and which I would also venture to say are issues for all religions). What are the words, instructions, understandings of God and what are the words, instructions, and understandings of people? And how are they related?

So whether it's homosexuality or making the sign of the cross over oneself; whether it's the place of women in the church or the process of church decision making; whether it's one's Holy Communion practice or how much water to be used in baptism; whether it is vestments or dancing; whether it's the age of baptism or the separation of church and state; these and other issues are debated along the lines of what is the Word of God and what are human traditions?

Our gospel today highlights washings – of hands – ritual purification – separation of the clean and the unclean – and the Pharisees can't work Jesus out. Remember that socially Jesus isn't a priest, he's not a scribe, but rather as a layman who teaches and is concerned about the kingdom of God, he appears to be a Pharisee. But on closer inspection, the Pharisees decide that he's not a very good Pharisee because he keeps breaking the 'rules'! So this time they question him about ritual purity – necessary for the kingdom. Are they wrong to be concerned about ritual cleanliness? Well, the Old Testament does contain many instructions about purifications so we must conclude that the topic has merit.

But the topic in the context of the tensions between Jesus and the Pharisees is not a genuinely academic query, a search for knowledge but is a religious hammer to attempt to knock Jesus and his disciples into line. This happens on other occasions – particularly when Jesus heals, he often gets into trouble because he breaks an aspect of the law which stated that no work was to be done on the Sabbath. So the laws, the traditions, the customs were used to get people to play by the rules – and that's their job, that's what laws are supposed to do. The question really is whether the laws, rules, and traditions control people or serve people.

And in response there's no gentle Jesus here turning the other cheek and slipping away to lick his wounds all chastised. Hypocrites! Jesus cites Isaiah and cuts to the heart of the matter. We like rules when we can control them and control others through them. We can subvert the intention of a law but sticking to the letter of the law. And Jesus counter punches bluntly by showing how the practice of Corban – offering a gift to God – was being used for self importance and self promotion at the expense of caring for one's parents – which is a specific commandment of God. It is not wrong to offer a gift to the Lord. It is not wrong to care for aged parents. What is wrong is to avoid caring for aged parents with 'logic' that uses God as the justification.

Of course the behaviours, the traditions, the 'rules', what we teach our children all reflect what we regard as important. Jesus challenged the Pharisees to see that in fact they were in danger of or were actually living out their true faith – self worship. by taking them back to the Moses and the commandments and by mentioning Isaiah, Jesus was situating them into a context of God's rescue and action – God's redemption – God's version of life, priorities and rules – and reminding them that if we're not careful we so fill religion with rules that we push God out all together!

The same is true today. By nature, our selfish sinful selves still want to claim centre stage even in God's house and in our relationship with God. We need to be able to make distinctions between what is essential and what is good – what is necessary and what is beneficial – without pushing God away. We need to know the centre of our faith – not as simplistic rules – but for what it really is – a relationship – a dynamic that we receive and don't control. This means for Christians we come face to face with two things – and not play them off against each other – the cross and the bible. At the cross we see our sin and God's grace and our relationship is established with God and of course we only know this because God has given us his Word. So we study his Word and deal with sin and grace each day as we follow Jesus. Jesus doesn't cancel law but fulfils it – and we then in our context work out how best to live that relationship. So we still keep the 10 Commandments – with the 3rd Commandment being fulfilled in Jesus and for he is our Sabbath rest. We no longer keep the dietary laws as the Jews do for Jesus himself declares all food clean – listen to next week's Gospel. Our relationship with Jesus is marked by freedom but not a licence to sin nor a cavalier attitude towards our brothers and sisters – and this freedom seeks to promote the cross and the bible – justification by faith as our central teaching – God's love in action for us.

So differences can emerge in various practices because of contexts and these are not necessarily wrong as long as they promote the cross and the bible. In a few minutes Tyler will be baptised. We could use any amount of water but we choose to use sprinkling or pouring because in our context for the last 500 years or so sections of the Christian Church insist on dunking. This insistence misunderstands the cross and the bible, turns God's grace into a law and from our perspective robs the baptised of comfort and leaves them with insecurity. Consequently to teach and to stir, Lutherans will usually use conspicuously less water to testify that it is God who works to give life in Christ to the baptised – so that Tyler may know all the days of his life that Jesus died for him on the cross and that God's Word speaks directly to him.

Our behaviour reflects our beliefs and so we are to grow in our understanding of why we live as we do. That's not being religious as such but living a reflective purposeful life. Many religions prefer you to switch off your brain when you come in the door but not Jesus and not the Lutheran Church. We believe that Jesus wants us to live active lives in relationship to him and for that he died and gave us life through his Word – whether they are words, water, bread and wine – and we are to work through the issues we face whether they are because of new technologies or old sins resurfacing – following him – staying at the cross and listening to his Word.

Invariably differences and disagreements will arise. Some we can live with and rejoice over as they express justification by faith and take us to the cross and the Word. Others we will have to resist because the cross is blurred or the Word is manipulated to say things it doesn't say. That is part of the Christian landscape until the Lord returns, seeking to be obedient to Jesus rather than the traditions of our own choosing.