

## Traditions: Good or Bad Identity Markers?

August 29, 2021

### I

Someone once said, “The Bible is alive. It speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold on me.” Well I think that’s a nice image. It has feet ... and runs after me. It has hands ... it grabs me ... and pulls me up short! So the Word of God shines through scripture – and we I think strain to hear.

Well, turning to today’s Gospel in Mark, I think Jesus is being a kind of prophet here, quoting Isaiah – that prophet of doom: “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” Now one function of prophets is to bring us back to that vital Word – to bring us back to the heart of the message.

And prophets can be unsettling, can’t they? ‘Cause they tend to pull us back up short – and point to the heart of the matter. So let’s think about this morning’s reading from Mark and imagine the scene as best we can.

### II

Now the Pharisees had traveled several days to get to this rural village – out in this back country, with no comforts and little amenities. See, they’d been getting troubling reports from their agents that this man was trying to undermine local authority – stirring up the natives, who seemed to be attracted to his loose lifestyle.

Although you couldn’t expect the “great unwashed” to appreciate all the rules of the tradition, nevertheless they are required to pay taxes, to obey authority, to give a portion of their crops, and to be ... well, submissive to the system. What was disturbing here was that this rabble rouser seemed not only to ignore observances but also to question the ways of those with authority. I mean, tried to undermine them! The whole thing seemed to be getting out of hand. This Jesus was a threat to order and stability. And this simply would not do.

So a decision was made last week to find Him and confront Him ... to see for themselves ... and to bring back a report to Jerusalem about the “dangerousness” potential of this movement.

Well now, there He was. They found Him sitting in a village market with a few of his hangers-on around Him. It was market day, and there was a large crowd of farmers and peasants – milling about, bringing their crops and wares and stuff into the village. It was noisy and dusty ... and hot!

The Pharisees huddled among themselves, and decided the best strategy was to face Him right there. Before a crowd ... expose him as a charlatan, who winked at the law ... as someone misguided – as just plain wrong. They’d do a little undermining of their own!

Now the Pharisees set high standards for themselves. I mean, they tithed to the hilt; they observed the Sabbath; they kept their homes, their food, their bodies pure. And so they were not, on the whole, bad people. They were sincere, serious about their religion. They were devoted to serving God in the best, holiest, purest way they knew how.

And you know what? That would have been OK if they’d stayed connected to the rest of their community, if they’d extended a helping hand to lift the others up.

But unfortunately, that didn't tend to happen. No, in fact what happened was exactly the opposite. 'Cause in fact their strict standards tended to cut them off from the rest of the folks ... creating intolerable burdens for ordinary folks.

And you know, I think their real concerns were not just about hygiene – washing hands and all. But much more basically, their concerns were about keeping spiritually pure. 'Cause to their minds, dirty hands pointed to a dirty heart. And since the world was a dirty place and sinners were also dirty – all dirt ... all kinds of it ... was dangerous. So purity laws were set up to seal up, wall off, and protect the true believers from contagious pollution.

So now maybe you can see why the Pharisees were so upset when Jesus' disciples didn't wash their hands before they ate. Those disciples were defying the tradition that had been set up by God to safeguard their very souls.

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Now of course, Jesus was apparently a pretty educated Jew ... so probably He knew all about these purity laws. But most of His followers ... simple fishermen and such ... they apparently weren't so informed. And I guess Jesus hadn't stressed a lot about those rules either. No, in fact He seemed to be rather careless about such things. Didn't seem to bother Him much when he touched a leper, or when He sat down to eat with unwashed sinners. No, He seemed to have other things on His mind—like forgiveness, like inclusion, like love, like mercy, like generosity.

Anyway, the Pharisees were scandalized by Jesus' flouting of their tradition, their rules of purity.

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But still, I wonder about it. Why were they really so very very upset? Why? Well, someone's suggested that beneath all these rules lay something very basic about human beings. And that's the need to mark identity ... identity markers he calls 'em. Seems that all groups of human beings have a tendency to be exclusive; folks want to know who's inside and who's out. So they ... we ... adopt identity markers – visible practices of dress or vocabulary or behavior that serve to set off who's inside the group from who's outside it.

Well, you know that, don't you? I mean if you were around in the '60s and you saw a Volkswagen van with flowers painted all over it and the slogan, "Make love, not war," you'd have known right away that that van was filled with flower children, with hippies who'd probably gone to Woodstock last summer and gotten stoned on marijuana.

Markers mark us off. Traditions set us apart and give us our identity as a people.

### III

Now let's think for a minute. What about some of our own markers – our traditions? I mean, maybe you can think of some of our religious traditions as markers in this way. 'Cause we have all kinds of practices and rituals, traditions surrounding how we do things, don't we? I mean, if you showed up on Sunday morning and found chopped liver and scotch on the altar instead of bread and wine, you might find that a bit unsettling.

'Cause we have a way of doing communion. Yes, found in scripture, recorded in the Gospels. Jesus' blessing bread and wine and offering them as his body and blood. At least, according to the oral tradition that got written down, and based on Jewish custom at that time – our way of doing communion. And so chopped liver and scotch just won't do.

And we have lots of other traditions, don't we? Good rituals and practices that open us up to God's grace in our lives ... infusing your life with meaning. The Christian year, the holy days, the stations of the cross on Good Friday, our hymns and folding our hands and kneeling for prayer. Our tradition, our ways of doing things that infuse our lives with deep meaning.

So traditions are good – opening you up to the mysteries of God at work in and around you.

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But. But. Sometimes traditions start out good but turn bad, become stumbling blocks ... walling off God's love ... walling off God's healing and compassion. In fact, I think traditions become bad when three things happen: one, when you begin to imagine that your traditions are necessary in order to serve God. And two, when your traditions cause you to exclude some who would serve God otherwise, or three, where your traditions cause you to think yourself morally or spiritually superior to those who don't follow your particular way of doing things.

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So back to the Gospel scene for a minute. Jesus turns on the Pharisees and lets 'em have it! He says, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandments of God in order to keep your tradition!" And then He says go look in a mirror. You're so careful about how you live and what you eat and the company you keep, but none of that'll keep you safe. 'Cause the danger isn't outside of you, waiting to seep in through your mouth and your pores.

No, the danger's already inside of you, in your very heart. So if you want to be pure, Jesus says, start there. Start with yourself instead of blaming the dirt on everyone else.

#### IV

Well, that's a scary place to start, isn't it? I mean, let's start with me ... let's start with you. See, I think you and I know, deep down inside, how sweet it is to look down on those we consider outside ... outside our purity markers, outside the identity markers that I have set for my group. I mean, it's so helpful, isn't it, to have an enemy or out group, or Other that I can despise for their, oh, meanness, or narrow-mindedness or prejudice or sinfulness or just plain ignorance. And then I don't have to own up to any of these things in myself ... buried way way down in the basement of my heart.

And even reading this Gospel story this morning, I bet those bad Pharisees function also like that for you and me, don't they? Nit-picking fundamentalists, holier-than-thou hypocrites, blind to what God was doing right before their eyes! I mean, such easy targets. But now you and I have our own pharisees, don't we ... others we've marked off as outside our boundaries – stupid, unenlightened, misguided folks ... all the Jerry Falwells of the world. Easy targets to shoot at.

But here's my point: I think that this scene in Mark's Gospel shows a struggle inside every one of us who tries to take our faith seriously. There is a self-righteousness in me that does not want to die. Oh, the

boundary markers might change from time to time. Who's in, and so forth. But the boundaries themselves all reinforce a false sense of superiority, fed by a desire to shun – to shut others out.

But again, look at Jesus' life. The tradition said that there should be no work ... not even healing ... done on the Sabbath. But Jesus did it anyway and many were healed on that day.

My point? Sometimes the tradition has to be broken so that the hand of grace can be extended. See, I think Jesus sets us free from traditions that crowd out the compassion of God, setting us free to see what's really important.

But please don't misunderstand me: Traditions do matter. They're how we pass on our whole faith from generation to generation. But there's a difference between important and immutable. And maybe it's the twisting of tradition that can harm. From our manners to our rubrics, traditions can become alienating – alienating us all from the Word of God.

So here's a final thought: Instead of fences around our congregation, why not visions of a wider inclusion – of class, of race, of lifestyle – the untouchables and unthinkable! The wrong element. Why not? Food for thought.

Finally. Let's pray this morning that God's Law transforms our hearts; Let's pray that God's Word unsettles us, makes us nervous. Let's pray that God's Word runs after us on swift feet, grabs us with sure hands, and holds us fast. Forever.

Amen.