

SECOND READING: Matthew 15:1-19

pg 16 NT

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ²“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.” ³He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴For God said, ^[a] ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ ⁵But you say that whoever tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,’ ^[b] then that person need not honor the father. ^[c] ⁶So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word ^[d] of God. ⁷You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

⁸‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
⁹in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’”

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

FIRST READING: 2 Corinthians 5: 14-21

pg 181 NT

¹⁴For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

¹⁶So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: ^[a] The old has gone, the new is here! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹God made him who had no sin to be sin ^[b] for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

This is the word of the Lord Thanks be to God.

“Ecclesial Health”

Ok, so the joke goes: *“How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb? The answer: FIVE! One to change the bulb, and four to reminisce about how good the old bulb was”* (Of course, the joke could be the same for Methodists, Anglicans, Baptists or any other too). And then there’s also that story where a visiting church leader/head meets a parishioner who has been attending the particular church for 50 years. *“Oh, you must have seen many changes in your time here,”* the leader says. *“Yes,”* replies the parishioner *“and you can be sure I opposed them all.”*¹

The problem that we’re talking about here is a problem of lifting up traditions or rituals which are built not on God’s truths but on cultural values and are held to as if they are gospel truth, or, as Ed Stetzer says, *“substituting the things we know for the things of God.”*² This problem has been plaguing the church from its very beginning. The Pharisees in our text today accused Jesus and his followers of not adhering to tradition, of going soft on one of the “traditional purity codes” which had been instituted after the rebuilding of the Temple, a tradition of the elders. It seems like a lot of fuss over washing hands before dinner, but the Pharisees had had it with Jesus. He was doing and saying new things that seemed wrong, like touching and healing the sick, freeing people from demons, hanging out with sinners and Samaritans. All of these people were considered unclean. Yet crowds of people were flocking to him. By accusing Jesus of this infraction of the Law, the Pharisees were charging him with being disloyal to the way things should be done!

Jesus responded not with a defense but with a counter attack. He accused them of a greater charge, that they had actually used their traditions to defy God’s commandments. He reached all the back to the prophet Isaiah, saying, *“This people honors me with their lips, but hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrine. You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”* In particular, Jesus lifted up the practice of renouncing obligations to care for one’s parents.

¹ NT. Wright. *Matthew for Everyone*, Vol 1 (London: WJKP; 2002), 194.

² Ed Stetzer. *“The Trap of Tradition.”* <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2016/march/trap-of-tradition.html> (accessed 2-15-20).

You see, the Israelite people knew that in the Law, the 10 commandments, God commands believers to honor our father and mother which includes looking after them in their old age. But in the Pharisaical tradition it was permitted that a son might make a gift to the Temple of an equivalent amount to what he would have otherwise spent on his parents or he might enter religious service. In either case he'd be excused from any further obligation to support his parents. This act of piety was called Qorban, a Hebrew term for gifts dedicated to God.³ Once a son vowed the Qorban, he was obligated to it, even if he repented of his behavior per the "Law of Oaths". The whole thing, Jesus pointed out, undermined the substance of the Law, the Law which was/is to love one's neighbor as self, in this case, one's parents, to help and care for and have compassion on them, not to judge, criticize or to take advantage of them.⁴ Ultimately, Jesus accused the Pharisees of being hypocrites, honoring tradition for tradition's sake, and having no intention of discerning and doing God's will. *"They had,"* as NT Wright says, *"elevated merely human customs to the status of divine commands, and in the process, they had overthrown the actual divine commands themselves."*⁵ They'd overthrown the divine commands themselves which were all about...well, loving others. (pause)

Father Arthur Greeley writes a weekly homily that I enjoy reading. He tells this story, *"Once upon a time a very, very conservative Catholic came to complain to his pastor. "The new Pope has let us down," he protested. "He's a great disappointment." "Ah," said the pastor. "I thought he was going to restore the church the way it used to be. He's wearing his Prada slippers and his Santa Claus cap but he really isn't doing what God wants." "Ah," said the priest again. "What do you think God wants?" asked the priest. "Well," said the man, "God wants all those women off the altar. Women should not be reading the scriptures or distributing Communion, or directing music. Not even if they're nuns should they be up there." "Indeed," said the pastor. The parishioner continued, "And we should put the mass back into Latin, because that's God's language. Why did we have to change it?" After allowing a pause*

³ Douglas Hare. "Interpretation. Matthew:" (Louisville: JKP; 1993), 174.

⁴David Lose. "Matthew 15:1-9" <https://www.davidlose.net/2014/09/matthew-151-9/> (accessed 2-13-20).

⁵NT. Wright. Matthew for Everyone, Vol 1 (London: WJKP; 2002), 194.

the pastor said, “Actually, maybe it should go back into Aramaic. That was Jesus’ language.”
“And the priests should wear their roman collars all the time. Just like the apostles did, right?” The priest was now beginning to enjoy himself. After another pause, the man said, “I just want our old traditional Catholic Church back again.” “Well, what’s traditional?” The pastor asked. “It’s the way it was when I was growing up.”⁶

It happens in any denomination...any. You may have heard of the famous “seven last words of the church”: *“We never did it this way before.”* Certainly, the Presbyterian Church has, over the years, argued a great deal, often to the point of schism, and frequently, the schisms involved or maybe centered on honoring tradition vs. new innovation. And it is important to stop here and make clear that it has not always been that the new was best. Jesus wasn’t saying that every new thing must be done and tradition abandoned. He didn’t say that *“tradition is dangerous and all things new are good,”* No, in, fact, his own criticism of the Pharisees was that their more recent traditions had undermined the ancient and foundational word of God, God’s word to love. Just as some people like to do things the same way year after year, when everything else in society is changing so rapidly, so some people like to do things as differently as they can as often as they can.⁷ Neither is a good thing. Our call is to follow God! Our call is to not focus on the method or the means but on the spirit behind these.

*Rev. Reggie Weaver, Pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Greensboro, NC, a very old church with a very proud and rich history, says that frequently he hears the comment, “we’ve got to preserve our history,” which he says they do as much as they can. “But the danger, he warns, “is that the history itself can become the focus and not the Spirit that made that history so great, the Spirit that can inspire and sustain the Church into the future. “Rituals and traditions are ok, but **THEY CAN NEVER BECOME OUR GODS. THEY WILL NOT SAVE US,**” he says.*

Many churches which are part of the Vital Congregations Initiative and studying this second mark, Ecclesial Health, I assume may be facing some difficult decisions. They may be being

⁶ Arthur Greeley. “Homily on Mark 7” <https://www.agreeley.com/hom08/aug31.htm>. (accessed 2-14-20)

⁷ NT Wright., 193

called to abandon some of their long-held traditions, their “sacred cows” in order that they continue to exist. “*Some tradition is the living faith of the dead,*” says Jaroslav Pelikan, “*and traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.*”⁸ It is however my belief that, while FPC-CC have some, we are blessed to not have a great many such sacred cows. The “7 last words of the church” are seldom uttered here, and if they are, they’re USUALLY said as we laugh and are about to do something new, whether it be a tackling new music or leadership or styles or methods!

Possibly this is because the church has a strong military base and military people by nature seem to be more accustomed to change. Possibly it’s because many in this congregation have not had a long history here. Maybe it’s because this family of faith is very diverse...many races, ages, languages and countries of origins, varied political and economic perspectives and orientations ...all resulting in attitudes of acceptance and flexibility. A great blessing. But I think it’s more than that. I think that this church values the study of scripture together, and we are a praying church. Both must remain at our heart for us to remain healthy. We can/need improve, but with study and prayer, we are more properly oriented toward God’s activity in our midst. And we are more likely to then hear and follow God’s voice. As NT Wright says, “*Unless we are constantly being refreshed and challenged by God’s word, we won’t have our wits about us to distinguish between healthy and hypocritical traditions or, for that matter, between life-giving innovations and deadly ones.*”⁹

Now, saying all of this does not mean that we are without risk as we are being nudged to do whatever new thing or place or way God calls us to do or go or be....maybe as we are challenged to see what is happening here and empower it more fully, or maybe it will be to step outside of these walls to do more hands-on ministry with new neighbors and venues. We need to be on our guard. It is easy to become very fond and protective of our familiar ways, to think we know “what works” because it’s worked before. It is easy also to get overly comfortable

⁸Jaroslav Pelikan. Quoted in: Ed Stetzer. “*The Trap of Tradition.*” <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2016/march/trap-of-tradition.html> (accessed 2-15-20.

⁹ NT Wright, 194.

with our time and place, one that holds special meaning to us, that may have birthed us, and without thinking fail to engage the current culture, the one that God is sending us into. And it is terribly easy to forget that we are here...we are here, brothers and sisters, to be participants in God's ever-changing and hurting world, even if it is to do old things in new ways...old things like loving our neighbors as we have been loved, with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength. So, FPC, as we go and do, and as we are yet to be, may the glory always be His!
Amen and amen.