

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost, September 2, 2018, Liturgical Year "B"

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Mark 7:1-23

"Scripture or Tradition?"

Today's Holy Gospel reading from Mark was a hard one, the question Jesus was asked was about purity; but the first answer that He gave was about people obeying human traditions rather than what was spelled out in God's word. Jesus gave a pretty complicated, example. We will look at purity a little later but for now concentrate on tradition.

Tradition is not just a great song from "Fiddler on the Roof," It is something that is passed down over a period of time – and sometimes the people lose track of why it is done that way. Let me tell you about a young priest who became Rector of his first parish, filling the shoes of an older priest who had served at that church for thirty-five years. They became very attached to the older priest and anything he said or did became something like solemn law. He tried very hard to meet the needs of his parish, but there seemed to be an air of discontent. He spoke to the senior warden and asked what he was doing wrong? The man told the priest that it was the way that he served communion. He was absolutely flabbergasted. He was doing it just as he had been taught in seminary and for years as an assistant rector in his previous church. He asked the warden for more information and he was told that he was not touching the radiator. And so, the young priest made a frantic phone call to the former rector saying that he was almost in the midst of a mutiny. He asked the old rector if he touched the radiator before he passed the chalice. "Why yes," he said. "I always did it, so that I could discharge the static electricity in my hands that had built up from the rug and not cause a spark when the cup was passed." So, for over thirty-five years, the people of his congregation had thought that touching the radiator was a part of the tradition of Holy Communion. I have to tell you that church has now gained the nickname, "The Church of the Holy Radiator." When I was an "altar boy" many years ago at a church on Long Island, when it got cold in the winter, we would move along the altar rail with the priest distribution the host, we didn't give the cup. There were some people that little long hairs on their chins, and as an altar boy we had to carry a paten, a disc with a black handle that you would place under people's chins in order to catch any crumbs. As a boy about eleven or twelve, if you rubbed your feet together on the carpet – and took that paten and put it up against the chin or those little hairs – blue sparks would happen – and they probably thought that they saw God. I never got in trouble for it – but I am sure the Lord is going to do something when I get there. I thought it was interesting to tell you about the tradition – and how traditions came seemingly come out of nowhere.

The debate between Jesus and the Pharisees was over two different understandings of what it meant to be a good Jew in the first century. To fully understand this one would have to look through the eyes of a first century Jew and not through the eyes of our present day. The charge that Jesus levels against the Pharisees and the legal experts is that, by teaching as essential law what is really only human "custom" or "tradition" - rather than from God's Law – is totally wrong. Because of this they are guilty of hypocrisy and what is really equal to play-acting. They are claiming to be teachers of God's truth and law, but in fact they are really only teaching

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human traditions. This comes up because of the earlier question was about the tradition of purity. Jesus uses a clever way to make His point – you heard Him speaking of mothers and fathers, right? Like a cunning accountant finding a loophole in the law which enables someone to get away without paying taxes, these legal experts have found a way for people to get out of any financial obligation to their parents. By declaring their property “*to belong to God,*” can be free of any or all further obligation to their parents. Wow, isn’t that hypocrisy? It was God who commanded people, through Moses, to ‘*Honor your father and your mother,*’ (Mark 7:10) (also in Exodus 20) and here these leaders were officially ‘*making it a gift devoted to God*” and so were actually making a mockery of the God they are claiming to honor!

Through all this – the bigger issue for Jesus and the Pharisees was - who speaks for God today? Is it God’s Word, is it the Holy Bible, or is it the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law? Who is offering a way of life which honors the God who spoke through Scripture? The Pharisees had built up, over nearly two hundred years, an agenda which was both political and religious. For them - the two went together. The traditions they had developed meant that Scripture was being interpreted and applied in particular directions, which supported their special programs. The way they looked at biblical purity and their laws was very similar – by their views. The hardline Pharisees were urging people to accept their ways – do it my way or the highway! Jesus, in His valuing ‘Scripture’, against ‘tradition’ was challenging, the very basis on which the Pharisees had built up their organizational empire.

If God’s kingdom was going to be coming through the work Jesus was doing, and the person of Jesus – by healing, by eating with tax collectors and sinners, by tackling demons head on – then that way that layer after layers of Pharisaic tradition had been pointing to - was dead in its tracks from the start. It just could not compare to God’s Word! Jesus’ argument for what He was doing was that it was the fulfilment of Scripture. Follow Him and you follow Scripture. Go the Pharisees’ way, and Scripture – supposedly the basis for their tradition, but was actually often undermined by it – would lose out.

Often when people get angry and start asking questions as to why someone’s doing something, it’s because there is a larger agenda at stake. Often it has political dimensions to it which quite often don’t appear on the surface. Part of being a Christian is to learn spiritual discernment, in other words – ask God and learn to understand His Holy Word - Scripture, and to test human traditions against it – what does God have to say.

Have you ever told a joke and saw nothing but blank stares? They just didn’t get it? What can you do? If you have to explain it, then that’ll take all the fun out of it. Have you ever had that happen – and the joke you told went over like a lead balloon? A parable isn’t a joke and the one that Jesus told about the parents, etc., was no laughing matter. It was the only way Jesus could say some of the most devastating things He wanted to say. If you’re trying to tell your own world that it’s going the wrong way, that its heroes fought for the wrong cause and its martyrs died in the wrong ditch, you better be careful how you do it. It’s got to be cryptic. The Pharisees

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needed to be answered. And so, "*again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'*" (Mark 7:14-15)

Jesus had expected His disciples to get the point, but it flew right over their heads. Talk of 'what goes into you' and 'what comes out of you' would seem to lead some people down a road of lavatory humor, or potty talk. What could Jesus have meant? Only when they get back to the house does Jesus explain, just as he did in Mark 4 with the parable of the sower. Jesus wasn't talking about physical things that come out of people, but instead He is talking about what comes out of the heart. You have to understand that the heart is our biggest filter. What comes into our head has to go through our heart. What your hearts feels and what your heart knows is what really leads you. Jesus suggests that the purity laws point to the real need of humans for a deeper purity, a purity of purpose. Eating meat, from crocodile to kangaroo, from pig to porcupine, won't affect that – or even squirrel. Those who get stuck on regulations about food, and never progress to the real point, are quite literally missing the heart of the matter. By focusing on outward purity, they are avoiding the much deeper challenge of the gospel, the challenge to the human heart. What matters are the internal, 'spiritual things'.

Jesus is insisting that good and bad external and physical actions come from internal and spiritual sources, and that the poisoned wells of human motivation are the real problem to which the purity laws are pointing. We can't just isolate one part of our human make-up and blame it for evil. We can't suggest that 'getting in touch with our deepest feelings' will give the clear answers.

If there is evil, it infects the whole. It just doesn't go for one part – but it spreads. That's what purity and impurity are really all about. Later in Mark 10:5 Jesus talks about hardened hearts that result in wicked thoughts and deeds. What is the solution? The kingdom of God is the solution. But what precisely does that mean?

The Jews in the Middle East had for centuries been surrounded by and infiltrated by paganism. Who was running their country? It was the Romans, and before that it was the Greeks, and before that it was the Syrians. It was a cultural force and as military might. What is more natural than to reinforce the purity codes which said, in the powerful language of cultural symbol, 'We are Jews' – they said! 'We are different! We don't live like you do!' But what if the kingdom of God meant throwing open the doors of God's people to anyone and everyone who would repent and believe? Come and learn about Paul's letter to the Galatians and see how from the beginning of time how God meant that the 'light to the Gentiles' would be His Son, Jesus Christ. As we know, this was Jesus' ultimate agenda was just this, and this was why He had to oppose the way the purity laws were being applied.

The old Jewish laws about clean and unclean foods, laws which divided Jew from Gentile, were irrelevant in God's eyes. Paul's letters show us how this issue remained an explosive one within

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the early church. Jesus’ basic point is that purity laws, including food laws, don’t actually touch the real human problem. What happened in and through Jesus brought the old Scriptures, the whole Old Covenant with Israel, to a new completion, a new fulfilment. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. The Apostle Peter had a vision that “*contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air*” which was after Jesus had ascended to the Father, reminding him of Jesus’ words from Mark 7, which is recalled in Acts chapter 10 – in which God told him, “*Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.*” (Acts 10:15) Peter heard those words from heaven, with God speaking. The Scriptures spoke of purity and set up codes as signs to it; Jesus was offering the reality. When you get to the place you wanted to go to – you turn off the GPS – and you don’t need to look for the signs any more, not because they were worthless but indeed because they were correct. If you don’t have a GPS – you use a map and signs. God put signs for us throughout Scripture - all pointing to one Person – His Son, Jesus Christ.

Learning to read the Old Testament in this way wasn’t easy for the early church and believe me it isn’t easy today. We need to realize that the Jewish Scriptures from Genesis up to Matthew. aren’t to be seen as a timeless code of behavior, but as the history which leads to Jesus Christ – His Story. I ask kids all the time – “how many pages of the Bible point to Jesus?” The answer is “all of them!” It is His Story! This does not mean that we can weed out bits we don’t like or understand. When things are set aside, as the purity laws are here, it’s not because they’re irrelevant but because the deeper truth to which they pointed has now arrived. You can turn off the GPS. Everything the Scriptures were getting at reached a peak in Jesus Christ; from now on everything is different. Figuring out that difference, and still remaining loyal to Holy Scripture, which is what Saint Andrew’s ANGLICAN Church did, when it officially came into being in May 2013. It is one of the most important parts of being a Christian.