

Song of Songs 2:8-13  
Psalm 45:1-2,7-10  
James 1:17-27  
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15,21-23

Proper 17B  
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island  
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## Tradition

Do you remember Fiddler on the Roof? Perhaps this will bring it back for you...



*An excerpt of the song "Tradition" from Fiddler on the Roof is played.*

Ah, tradition. This story, Fiddler on the Roof, is set in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Imperial Russia. It's the story of Tevye, a man struggling to maintain his family's Jewish traditions in the face of daughters who want to marry for love rather than traditional family concerns, the intrusion of modern values into traditional values, and a Russian Tsar who ultimately evicts the Jews from their village because of many things, not the least of which is that he can see no value in their traditions.

Like the Pharisees, like Tevye and the people in the village of Anatevka, Episcopalians value tradition. But Jesus seems to be calling tradition into question today and doing it in one of the most mundane ways imaginable. Yet the seeming triviality of handwashing actually helps Jesus make his point. Even something as inconsequential as washing your hands, a conversation most of us have had in our own kitchens, can be an affront to the authorities. The tradition itself may or may not be important. But the audacity of ignoring tradition or even calling it into question was too much for the pharisees who saw themselves as tradition's guardians.

They had been watching Jesus very closely, and they were beginning to see that Jesus was saying things and doing things that were not entirely in keeping with Jewish traditions. It wasn't the law Jesus called into question – there is no law in the Old Testament that says you have to wash your hands before you eat – it was tradition.

It's important to remember that Jesus was a practicing Jew, steeped in Hebrew Law, Scripture and tradition. Jesus didn't set out to develop a new religion, and I can't imagine he ever thought of himself as anything other than a practicing Jew. Yet he broke with tradition – not law, but tradition – over and over again. And in this first little break with tradition, Jesus began to dismantle the wall around traditional religious practices, a wall that conserved the Jewish way of life but sometimes denied the value of relationships.

Remember, it wasn't the Law Jesus was dismantling, it was tradition. Jesus summarized the Law by saying Love God, love your neighbor, showing us that relationships are at the heart of everything. When I think about Jesus dismantling his own religious traditions, I wonder what traditions he'd dismantle here in our church, today. It's not surprising that the scribes and

Pharisees, the “legitimate” religious authorities of the day were railing against Jesus and his followers - they were operating outside the traditions of the elders. It was the job of the Pharisees to maintain the established religion just as it is the job of every good institution’s leaders to maintain and sustain the institution, sometimes without considering the cost. The Pharisees knew what was right – that would be the tradition of the elders – and they did what was right, because they believed doing the right thing was what gave them standing in God’s eyes. It’s what they’d believed for thousands of years. So you see, it’s complicated. We can’t layer our individual realities, observations or biases over the actions of people with a different world view, whether that is a world view from 2,000 years ago in Palestine, or the world view in South Sudan today. Jesus had the same world view as the ones he was calling into question, it’s just that his view wasn’t limited only to people who looked and thought and acted like he did. Jesus hung out with outcasts and sinners, because for Jesus, everyone belonged. He had a kingdom view, and that kingdom view could not abide the exclusivity that was perpetuated by the rules that kept Jewish tradition in perfect order.

The religious authorities of his day had become so intent on the particulars of the Law, so distracted by any small deviation from tradition that they were pushing people away, shutting people out, making people wrong. They were intent on following the letter of the law, not its spirit. It’s why Jesus reminded those religious authorities of their own scripture. Listen again:

*This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines. You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.*

Male or female. Jew or Greek. Slave or Free. Clean or unclean. Insider or outsider. Rich or poor. Brown or white. Republican or democrat. You see how it goes. When our own way, our own view, no matter how beautiful or kind or generous it is, when our own way becomes the only way, we shut people out, and instead of pursuing God’s mission of Love, we pursue perfection, or rule-following, or tradition. And when we do that, we effectively put up walls so that nobody can get in unless they are just like us. When we insist on a particular way, and call that way “tradition” we often set ourselves apart, not for holiness, but for self-righteousness or community-righteousness or political party-righteousness or even Episcopal-righteousness. And when we allow our tradition to separate us from others, we separate ourselves from God too.

Does all this mean we should throw tradition out the window? Of course not. I love our traditions. At their best, they contribute to a sense of being part of something that is ancient and holy, they deepen our worship and remind us that we are set apart for God. Tradition is so important to the Episcopal way of being, that along with scripture and reason, it is one of the legs of the three-legged stool our church stands on. And still, we must be very careful not to love our traditions so much that they become more important than relationships, than loving, than being relevant, than working for the kingdom by being the hands and feet and face of Christ in the world. We cannot use our rules, our traditions alone to dictate the thoughts and

actions of our daily lives. As Jesus said, we cannot afford to abandon God's commandment to love, in order to preserve our own human traditions.

This story started with a conversation about washing your hands before you eat. Jewish Law was exceedingly concerned with food and everything that happened around food – what to eat, when to eat, how to eat, with whom to eat. The traditions that developed around the Law created many more concerns that Jesus supplanted. *It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles, he says. It's what comes out of the mouth that's the problem.* I think one of the many things that means is that while traditions can be helpful, no tradition can protect us from any ugliness we harbor inside ourselves. Love cannot be mandated, compassion cannot be mandated, mercy cannot be mandated. It's what's in our hearts, not what's in our bellies, that dictates the way we live our lives. And at some point, each one of us has to search our heart and allow ourselves to see everything there is to see in there, to look upon our failings and our strengths as God does, with the eyes of love.

We need to search our hearts, not for the sake of fault-finding or self-criticism, but for the sake of love. For the sake of truth. For the sake of freedom. For the sake of repenting and returning to the God who loves us and lives in us and wants only goodness for us and for everyone else. It's a powerful thing to ponder the reality that God sees everything, every single bit of us and loves us with absolute abandon. That's because love is who God is. It's who we are too and when we love the way God loves, whether it be ourselves or others, God's kingdom comes so much closer.

Can you imagine a world where self-compassion reigns and love is the law? That, my dears the Kingdom of Heaven, and it's ours to build. We really are called to be the first fruits of God's creation, the image of God's redemptive and loving work in the world, called to be doers of the Word, not hearers only, called to remember who and whose we are. *True religion, James says, is caring for one another.* I'm pretty sure he learned that from Jesus. We practice a tradition that at its best is expansive and thoughtful, open-minded and open-hearted, a tradition that is curious, that welcomes ambiguity, a tradition that embraces the mystery and love that is God, a tradition that holds the Gospel so dear that it has the capacity to transform our very lives.

It has been said that *Tradition is the living faith of the dead, and that traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.*<sup>1</sup> I don't think Jesus was so much condemning tradition as he was condemning traditionalism. I think we need to be mindful of that as well, so that we don't allow God's mission to be diminished by our traditions and limitations, don't allow God's love be stifled because we're so certain that we are right and so concerned about things being the way we say they're "supposed to be." Because at the heart of our tradition, the one commandment Jesus gave us, the only law that really matters is the law of Love. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Pelikan, Jaroslav. The Vindication of Tradition: The 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities. Yale University Press, 1984.