

THE HEART OF THE MATTER Matthew 15:10-20
Holiday Island Presbyterian Church
August 20, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

Our scripture begins with a response to an earlier question:

**Vs.2 “Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders?
For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.”**

So, we have actually entered the middle of a conversation.

**The Pharisees - and teachers of the law -
have noticed that the disciples do not wash their hands
before they break bread together
and therefore they are not keeping tradition.**

**The Pharisees have interpreted the law of ritual purity
to include washing of the hands before eating.**

**It's important to note
this has nothing to do with personal hygiene.
It has everything to do with interpreting the law -
- according to the way the Pharisees interpret it.**

**There is *nothing* in the Levitical law
that requires a person to wash his/her hands before eating.
The only laws concerning *ritual* cleanliness
are connected to temple worship.**

**Therefore, the dispute does not rest upon any code
dealing with biblical purity;
it is a matter of tradition handed down by the Pharisees.**

Here's a modern illustration of tradition.

**During a service at an old synagogue in Eastern Europe,
when the Shema prayer was said,
[You know the prayer - “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God . . .”
It is the Jewish equivalent of the Apostles’ Creed]
when it was said, half the congregants stood up
and half remained sitting.**

**The half that was seated
started yelling at those standing to sit down,
and the ones standing yelled at the ones sitting to stand
up...**

**The rabbi, learned as he was in the Law and commentaries,
didn’t know what to do.
Nothing in either addressed the problem.**

**His congregation suggested
that he consult a house-bound 98 year old man,
who was one of the founders of their temple.**

**Perhaps the elderly man
would be able to tell the rabbi
what the actual temple tradition was.**

**So he went to the nursing home
with a representative of each faction of the congregation.**

**The one whose followers stood during Shema said to the old man,
“Is the tradition to stand during this prayer?”**

The old man answered, “No, that is not the tradition.”

**The one whose followers sat asked,
“Is the tradition to sit during Shema?”**

The old man answered, “No, that is not the tradition.”

**Then the rabbi said to the old man,
“The congregants fight all the time,
yelling at each other about whether they should sit or
stand...”**

**The old man interrupted, exclaiming,
“Yes! THAT is the tradition!”**

**The Pharisees had strayed from spirit of the law so far
that the law had been elevated to the point
it was being given precedence over God’s will.**

**What Jesus has to say about this
is directed to (1) Jews,
(2) from Jerusalem,
(3) with a religion that put too much emphasis
on external practices -
- practices handed down through
antiquity.**

A WORD ABOUT TRADITION:

Tradition in and of itself is not necessarily bad.

**I am sure this church has some favored traditions . . .
. . . the spaghetti dinner is one; the ice cream social -
another.**

**It is when tradition
stands in the way of God’s will
that it becomes hollow and life-leaching instead of life-
giving.**

An example:

**A young girl was watching her mother cook one day.
The mother was preparing roast beef.**

**As the mother placed the roast into the roasting pan,
she very carefully cut the end off the roast
and set it aside.**

**That seemed to be a very curious practice
so the little girl asked her about it.**

**Her mother wasn't sure why it was done that way -
- it was the way her mother had always cooked it.**

**The little girl made a mental note of the practice
and the next time she visited her grandmother
she asked why she cut the end of her roast before cooking
it.**

**Her grandmother said -
- well, the only roasting pan she had
was not big enough to put a whole roast in it
so she always cut the end off so it would fit.**

**Sometimes we adopt traditions for no apparent reason -
- but since they are *traditions*, we must honor and obey them.**

**The disciples are caught
between the respected teachers of the law
and what Jesus is teaching.
So, they seek clarification and understanding.**

**In response,
Jesus refers to the teachers as blind guides
trying to lead people they have judged to be blind
of the laws and practices - tradition.**

Jesus said:

**Verse 14 Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind.
And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a
pit.”**

**This is a bit confusing for the disciples
because it runs contrary
to what they have been taught to practice.**

**The pharisees and teachers of the law
have access to the scrolls
which contain what has been written by the prophets.**

But they have not been interpreting them correctly.

So, Peter asks for further clarification.

WHAT JESUS SAID:

Jesus reacts pretty strongly to the disciples.

**He basically is incredulous
that the disciples still do not understand what is going on.**

“Where have you been?”

“Have you not been paying attention?”

**It is simple, according to Jesus,
what is eaten is digested.**

**Therefore, it’s not what goes *into* a person
in the form of food that matters.**

However, what we *say* -

**- what comes out of our mouths -
is directly related to our “heart.”**

Jesus is trying to say

**that what actually defiles us
is not something that comes from outside of us . . .**

**. . . it comes from what we really are -
- our core being
- the very heart of the person.**

Trust me,

Jesus is far less concerned with dietary laws and hygienic practices than He is with the spiritual condition of our hearts.

This interpretation stands in direct opposition to what the Pharisees and teachers of the law have been teaching and the tradition they are insisting on keeping.

It is not that Jesus is sweeping aside the law; Jesus is challenging the *interpretation* of that law.

It is only later, after the Resurrection, when we began to understand who Jesus truly was and the significance of what he taught.

Take Paul, for example -

Paul wrote this to the Romans:

Romans 14:17 - For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,

Jesus makes a clear distinction between the *form* of religion and the *object* of religion.

WHAT IT MEANS TO US:

**OK . . . it's about this time in the sermon that my wife begins to fidget and ask:
"What has this to do with me?"**

Let me see if I can answer that.

We all have traditions . . .

**. . . from the way we celebrate birthdays
. . . to the way we prefer to worship God.**

**It is when we put more emphasis on the *tradition*
than on what really matters
that we begin to stray.**

Well, how does that happen?

It all begins with the “heart.”

**That’s a word that can have many meanings and nuances
depending on the context . . .**

**. . . a persistent athlete is said to have “heart”
. . . in my day, we had to learn poetry by “heart”
. . . it can mean the center of something like artichokes**

**The meaning I want to focus on today is
the notion of the heart as the seat of our inmost feelings;
an indication of our will
the seat of emotions, especially love and affection.**

**Jesus was saying that what we *eat* - what we consume
has very little effect upon the seat of our emotions.
It may alter our *shape*
but it will not alter our *soul*.**

**Perhaps if Jesus knew about diabetes and high cholesterol
He would have worded this teaching a little differently!**

Have you ever heard the saying: “Class will out?”

**It basically means that if you give a person long enough
eventually they will reveal who and what they really are.**

**What we harbor at our very “heart”
will sooner or later reveal itself in our actions -
- it will affect our decisions and our relationships.**

Sometimes folks become emotional “hoarders.”

**They get such great joy and satisfaction
from a certain action or activity
they yearn to recapture that emotion
through the repetition of the action or activity.
And the activity becomes tradition.**

**There is nothing particularly wrong with that.
Unless it stands in the way of progressing towards God’s will.**

**If you attend church because of “tradition” -
- if the first Sunday of the month we celebrate the Lord’s
Supper
- if we always repeat something in worship
because of “tradition”
then we have lost the true meaning of what we
are doing.**

**Being an emotional “hoarder” -
- hanging onto tradition for tradition’s sake -
- is *exactly* what the Pharisees were doing . . .
. . . and Jesus was warning us to challenge those
traditions!**

**If a particular tradition leads us closer to God,
then - by all means - pursue that tradition!**

Morning prayers, evening prayers, prayers before meals .

..

**But . . . if we allow tradition to stand in the way of spiritual maturity
- if tradition is preventing us from following Jesus as we are called -
- then we need to examine ourselves
- examine our hearts -
- and perhaps abandon that tradition.**

**When the contents of our “hearts”
cause us to do something against God’s will . . .
. . . then we are no better than the Pharisees.**