

Sermon: The Heart of the Matter
15 Pentecost, Year B
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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An Irish man walks into a pub. The bartender asks him, "What'll you have?" The man says, "Give me three pints of Guinness please." So the bartender brings him three pints and the man proceeds to alternately sip one, then the other, then the third until they're gone. He then orders three more. The bartender says, "Sir, I know you like them cold. You don't have to order three at a time. I can keep an eye on it and when you get low, I'll bring you a fresh cold one." The man says, "You don't understand. I have two brothers, one in Australia and one in the States. We made a vow to each other that every Saturday night we'd still drink together. So right now, my brothers have three Guinness Stouts too, and we're drinking together. The bartender thought that was a wonderful **tradition**. Every week the man came in and ordered three beers. Then one week he came in and ordered only two. He drank them and then ordered two more. The bartender said to him, "I know what your tradition is, and I'd just like to say that I'm sorry that one of your brothers died." The man said, "Oh, me brothers are fine---I just quit drinking."

In Mark's Gospel passage of today, Jesus is enmeshed in a controversy about eating traditions. Jesus challenges the religious leaders in their understanding of what is clean and what is unclean, and frankly, challenges our own scientific concepts of what is clean and unclean. Jesus' disciples weren't washing their hands before they ate! Didn't they know about all the germs and diseases associated with eating with dirty hands? Actually, probably not! But Jesus and the religious leaders disagree here, not on scientific realities but on the question of ritual purity. Jesus is pushing beyond the boundaries of a closed religious system, where ritual purity takes a dominant role.

Soon after this story in Mark, Jesus will be calling on his disciples to push another boundary with the issue of eating as they feed the four thousand folks gathered in Gentile territory. The tradition was that Jews did not eat with Gentiles. The challenge to the religious leaders is to take a new look at the traditions they hold dear and breathe new life into them. And the challenge to Jesus' disciples is to follow Jesus' lead as he feeds the hungry, both Jew and Gentile. Mark's audience, the early church, is likely experiencing their own tensions as they began to make changes in their practices. And Mark is preparing the reader for some traditions to be upended... in a seriously spectacular way!

Jesus shows that human traditions can lead to the rejection of the commandment of God. It is the *Spirit* of the law that is important to Jesus. Jesus' concern is that of moral impurity vs. ritual impurity. What is going on with the inner being? What is the condition of one's heart?

In the Anglican tradition it is said that we Anglicans (of course, this includes Episcopalians) base our theology, the way we think about God and how God would have us live, by the metaphor of the three legged stool. The three legs include the most important leg of Scripture, the leg of tradition and the leg of reason. So on any given subject, we examine what Scripture says, what the tradition of the church says and then what reason says. And through a prayerful approach, we aim to come to an understanding of what God would have us think and do.

In the church itself, where does our own tradition reflect the Spirit of God's law? For many of us the beauty of this room, the windows, the stenciling, the altar, all reflect the beauty of the Holy and help us connect with God. But on the other hand, when have we been so enamored by the beautiful language, for instance, of our own Book of Common Prayer, that we fail to allow it to connect us to the God it points to? What is important here in our traditions? Do we sometimes major in minors, zeroing in on our own traditions while avoiding God's word? Do we sometimes allow the small things to interfere with our following God's commandments to love?

What are the essentials to our faith? What is **vital**? To distill what the essentials of our faith are means sometimes to keep a tradition and sometimes to let it go. There are traditions we need to keep. In our baptismal vows we promise to continue in the apostles' teaching and in the prayers, in fellowship and in the breaking of bread? This is basically what we do on Sundays. A tradition worth keeping! Because it keeps us closely connected to God's word and to one another.

Sometimes we need to look at traditions to see which ones we can shake loose. For instance, some of you will remember when the church gave up the tradition of having only male priests or having the altar up against the wall of the church.

Moving beyond the church walls, can we think of other traditions? Some of our traditions that we may hold dear in a personal way may mask our unwillingness to follow Jesus' mandate that we love God and love one another. And some traditions actually harm our ability to see all of God's children as just that – God's children. When do we glorify or idolize our past and focus on the traditions of men/people and ignore the commandments of God, the commandment to love God and love one another? How do we honor God with our lips but not with our hearts? Are our traditions helping or are they hurting? Is our tradition sacred or is the love of God sacred?

There is a tension between tradition and change. Change can be difficult but as we distill the essentials of the Christian faith, the essentials of caring for the poor, being inclusive, honoring and respecting creation, basically loving God and loving neighbor, and if we are serious about our faith, we must sometimes be willing to shake loose the less essential traditions.

Jesus is always pointing to the heart of the matter; both the essentials of the faith but also what is within our own hearts. I wonder what traditions Jesus may be calling us to keep and which ones to upend... in a seriously spectacular way?

Amen.