

Proper 16 – The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Mark 7:1-13

In the name of the Father and of the + Son of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The prophet Isaiah recorded these words from God: "Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men..." (Isaiah 29:13) Today, you heard Jesus quote from Isaiah, these words which are full of Him, these words which He is: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."

The words of Isaiah were fulfilled in the hearing of the Pharisees in today's Gospel, though they were most certainly true throughout the history of Judah and Israel, and even into today. It centers around the word "tradition," and all the baggage that it carries.

Tradition is not an evil word. Tradition is a good and noble concept, a gift of God like many others that would fall under the First Article. It's what people do with tradition or view tradition that is evil, as is typically done with First Article gifts. Tradition is simply the things handed down from one generation to the next; it's the things held onto that connect one to the past, to their past, a way in which to honor and give respect to those who have gone before.

It is traditional to enjoy a turkey dinner on Thanksgiving as a means to connect to a first group of settlers in New England and their meal of thanks. It is traditional to exchange gifts on Christmas in honor of the gift of Life that is come to earth in the incarnate Son of God and in remembrance of the gifts given to Him by the astrologers from the east.

Tradition is an important tool that God has given. If it were not for tradition, there wouldn't remain many ancient works of literature from some of the greatest authors of history, such as Homer, Euripides, Plato, and Socrates, whose works in some cases weren't written until centuries after they had died. Yet, you can read their works simply for the fact that they were passed down, word-for-word, from one generation to the next until they were inscribed. In that sense, then, you also have the Word of God—the Bible—handed down as a tradition. While many of the authors recorded their words or had them recorded, the Scriptures are given to one generation of Christians and the next, from age to age. It would follow, then, that the practices derived from the Scripture are traditions, too—such as the liturgy, Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, the Lord's Supper—handed down, through the generations, from God Himself, even as He has commanded, "As you are going," and, "Do this in remembrance of me." (cf. Matthew 28:19, Luke 22:19)

So, what is done in this gathering together to hear the Word of God and receive the Sacrament, is very traditional. It connects you with the church of all times and all places—dear listeners, the Word of God, the liturgy, the Sacraments, and even this hymnody, makes you a part of the church catholic (little-c)! That is the actual meaning of the word catholic: "according to the whole," or "of all times and all places." This is all very good. This traditional liturgy, the reverence given the Sacraments, even sacred hymnody, all make is so that you, as it has often been described, sing the same song as the ancient church.

But, there is a danger you can easily run into, and one which you have likely heard or even uttered. When a tradition is run for the tradition's sake, it is always done because, "We've always done it that way." Tradition in this sense does barely connects you to anything, spare a sense that this is the way your ancestors have done things. "It worked for them, it must work for us." While that may be said, it never seeks to know *why* they did things one way or another. Tradition then becomes a thoughtless or mindless ritual. There is no value to tradition when it is run for tradition's sake.

Into this mindset can be slipped any practice or ideal. “The elders always washed their hands, utensils, and couches before eating, and so do we.” Then, attached with this tradition is attached the piety which believes that it is the keeping of the tradition that pleases God. That’s why the Pharisees complained to Jesus when His disciples ate without washing their hands. And let me be clear here: the disciples weren’t merely eating their bread with dirty hands, they did not go through the ritual before-dinner washing, which carried a spiritual or religious significance for them over and above any hygienic reality. Therefore, to the Pharisees, not washing before eating was anti-traditional taboo. Jesus’ disciples ate bread with defiled hands, and this, in turn, defiled them in the sight of the Pharisees, and, so they believed, defiled them in the sight of God.

How does Jesus respond?

Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written,
“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”

You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men. You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, “Honor your father and your mother”; and, “Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.” But you say, “If a man tells his father or his mother, Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban” (that is, given to God)—then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.

The Pharisees had taken the tradition of the elders, the ritual washing they used to practice, and elevated it to part of their religion. Now, it’s hard to say that the elders’ ritual was started to achieve some sort of godly cleanliness, that it started as a practice in order to please God. Perhaps it was; maybe it wasn’t. Maybe as part of this ritual was the recitation of a Psalm or prayer or the singing of some spiritual song, almost making it seem like it’s bordering on worship (I mean, be honest, who hasn’t at one time or another prayed or sang part of hymn when washing the dishes?). The point of today’s text, though, is that it had become a type of worship by the time Jesus was walking among the Pharisees, who did many such things, teaching as doctrines the traditions of men. All of these traditions had been employed without any evidence from the Word of God, and at times, completely against the Word of God.

It is not written that one must ritually wash their hands, utensils, and couches before eating in order to be found worthy before God. Nor is it written that one can neglect and reject honor and obedience to father and mother in place of showing that honor and obedience to God alone, to the detriment of one’s parents. Yet, in Jesus’ time, this is exactly what the people being taught by the Pharisees were receiving as the Word of God. They were teaching the traditions and commandments of men as the doctrines of God.

There are some modern parallels. For instance, there are holy orders that are set up as part of the Church of Rome. In these orders you can find monks and nuns who have abandoned honor for father and mother in place of a life fully devoted to God. Now, I do want to go on record as saying that there are some benefits to such an ascetic lifestyle, both spiritual and temporal, such as richer devotional life with more time spent in the Scriptures as well as some delicious breads, cheeses, coffees, and beers. The irony in that devotional life, however, is that this lifestyle is seen as being more holy and God-pleasing than other vocations, not the least of which is that of son and daughter. Our churches teach, however, that there are good works to be found and done in every God-given vocation, *including* son and daughter.

You're not off the hook either, being members of the Lutheran church which, as you read through the Lutheran Confessions, reject those holy orders. The Pharisaic tradition of putting a glistening, godly polish on sin finds its way into your lives, too. It happens every time you make an excuse for a sin, every time you justify your sin. You hit your brother or sister because they hit you first or because your anger against them is just—retribution is justifiable. You took the pen, pencil, or other office supplies from your employer because you work hard and are due more compensation than your pay check shows. You gossip, speaking all manner of evils against your neighbor because they live in gross, manifest sin—it's okay because it's the truth that everybody knows, even though no one knows the whole story. "And many such things you do," all of which may seem right, but are declared to be sin by the Law of God.

Jesus said, "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." (Matthew 5:22) It is written in Exodus, "You shall not steal," and "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." (Exodus 20:15-16) Of the second one, you're taught, "We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way." Of it all, Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." (Matthew 5:17)

Both the polishing of sin and setting up traditions as doctrinal are means of justifying one's actions before God. In a way, you could say that sin polishing is traditional, too. In any case, tradition has become religious idolatry—something that you *must* do in order to earn God's favor, and so you go through the motions in order to get your fill of holiness for the week or feel better about yourself and the sins you've committed. In so doing, you do nothing more than honor God with your lips, but your hearts are far from Him, as Isaiah prophesied, Jesus quoted, and the Pharisees fulfilled.

"Repent, and believe in the Gospel." (Mark 1:15) The Gospel is this: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." He is come and has fulfilled the Law. That is why you are here to gather at the altar in the traditional liturgy, repent of all of your sin, all of the ways you have polished your sin with self-justifying sin (sin upon sin), and receive Him who is the fulfillment of the Law. Here is the good news for you, dear listeners: The Son of God did not come to destroy the Law, but He is the fulfillment of the Law, all of its precepts and demands. He kept the Law perfectly for you, and for you—did as the Law demanded you do—and He suffered and died as the Law demanded, as payment for sin, for your sin. He is come to you as the Law fulfiller, your sin-bearer, your Sacrifice as He has come to the church of all times and places, and He gives Himself to you for the forgiveness of your sins, life, and salvation.

That's how tradition works with Jesus. In Him, there is no boasting, least of all in tradition and pedigree. This is how St. Paul put it:

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:4-11)

Paul was an upright man, a Pharisee among Pharisees. He kept the Law (or so he may have thought) and even stood by all of those traditions of the elders. He did it all, and yet not one bit of it mattered when it came to Christ. Paul's Pharisaic righteousness was no match for the righteousness He gained from Jesus Christ—from full and complete God-given faith and trust in Jesus and His sacrifice upon the cross of Calvary. Paul describes his own righteousness as rubbish—"a steaming pile of dog crap" would be a better translation of the word he uses—compared to the righteousness that is His in Christ Jesus.

Being in Christ, St. Paul was rescued from his former Pharisaic ideals, especially those which ran counter to the Word of God. And in Christ, He was given the Biblical tradition of finding in Jesus the forgiveness of his sins in the means in which Jesus comes—in the Word, in Holy Baptism, in Holy Absolution, in the Lord's Supper.

This is the tradition of God, handed down from generation to generation, practiced by the apostles, by St. Paul himself following his conversion, and commanded by God. By His command, Jesus invites you to Himself in these means, gives Himself to you in these means, joins you to Himself and His righteousness in these means, so that you, like St. Paul before, would count all of your self-righteousness and religious traditions as "rubbish," and be conformed to His death so that you would attain to the resurrection from the dead, even as Jesus died and rose again for your salvation.

This gathering of the saints is a good tradition, dear listeners, and one not to be neglected. (cf. Hebrews 10:25) You are here, gathered by the Spirit of God around Word and Sacrament, as the saints gone before have been. You are here by grace to receive Jesus, who is truly, flesh-and-blood present. By Baptism, you, like the saints before you, have been and are joined to Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, for the forgiveness of your sins, life, and salvation. In Holy Absolution, you are constantly reminded of your joining to Jesus Christ's death and resurrection for the forgiveness of your sins, life, and salvation. In the Lord's Supper, you tangibly receive the benefits of Christ's death to which you have been joined as He comes to you, sacrificed body and blood given in bread and wine. All of this is declared to you, in your hearing, by the Word of God, around all of which you are gathered. Jesus is graciously present for you in these means—His tradition, His doctrine, His commandment—and so you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.