

TRADITION VS ILLUMINATION

Sept. 2, 2018

Song of Solomon 2: 8-15

James 1: 17-27

Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

It does seem as though everything that we have read from the Gospel recently has been so extremely explicit about bodily function or about consuming flesh and blood. It is very interesting actually because I do think that sometimes we think about religion as being a sort of cerebral matter or at least not of the body. Yet here we are reading from the Bible of functions that we do not mention in polite conversation. That Jesus... he was indeed a rebel!

And that is what I want to talk about today, about the matter of tradition and the way that he is turning people away from it and what that may mean.

The text says, that "when they gathered around Jesus, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with [unwashed] hands." It goes on to say that "the Pharisees, and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands," and it points out some other rituals of cleanliness. Again, all of those are good things to do if only for hygiene. But for the Pharisees and scribes, these rituals meant much more than that. They, too, had heard some stories. They knew how their ancestors had been enslaved in Egypt, how God had brought them out. They knew that while they were in the wilderness, God had given them the law that would help them to keep their freedom. Those laws were also meant to keep them united as a community. So it was important for them to keep the law in order maintain their freedom and as a sign of their devotion to God. But obeying the laws was complicated. In many cases, these laws gave very clear instructions on the way certain situations should be handled. Yet, in other cases, the law simply provided a moral principle that was open to interpretation, so an individual or a group of people would have to decide how that principle would apply.

Over time there came a group of legal scholars, called scribes, who saw that as long as there was this fluidity with some of the laws, then the door was open for all the laws to be broken. So they developed thousands of other rules as a kind of "fence" around the original law in order to keep them from being broken. These rules were not written down. They became part of an oral tradition, which the passage calls "the tradition of the elders," which was passed down from generation to generation until it became common practice.

One of the rules in this tradition had to do with the washing of hands. In the written law, there were many guidelines for what Jews could and could not eat, outlining which foods were clean or unclean. If a person were to eat food considered unclean, then that person became unclean and was unfit to serve God, to enter the temple, or enter into the presence of other people.

Well, the tradition of the elders said that even if the food itself was clean, by eating with unwashed hands that food became unclean. To avoid that, the tradition prescribed this ritual of washing your hands before you eat. So when they saw that the disciples were eating with unwashed hands, they got a little concerned and they asked Jesus about it. And notice how they asked him. They said, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"

They didn't just question this particular practice; they challenged the disciples' whole way of life! And they did it, not on the basis of the law. They were concerned about preserving their own, human tradition: Why don't you do things the way we do it?!

Well, Jesus and his disciples were changing everything up. They were doing all those things the tradition told them not to do...touching and healing the sick, freeing people from demons, hanging out with the Gentiles. All these people were considered unclean. He and his disciples lived their lives in the dirt. He was changing the form.

He didn't deny what his disciples did. He didn't even justify what they were doing, explicitly. Instead, Jesus reached way back through the tradition, all the way to the prophet Isaiah, saying, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrine." He goes on to say that, "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

In other words, "You intended your tradition to be a fence around the law, but you've built a wall, and such a high wall that you can no longer see

what it is you're trying to protect. You no longer understand the commandment of God. And all those little rituals you perform in the name of God, they mean nothing...because your heart isn't right." *The Pharisees and scribes focused so much on the means, the methods, the forms with which to protect the law that they failed to be transformed by the spirit of the law. We still do that.

Now I have another example that I'd like to lay on you and that is from "Fiddler On The Roof", the marvelous musical that revolves around Tevye, his wife, Golda, and their three daughters finding husbands. Tradition says that the parents use a matchmaker to find husbands for the daughters.

"Matchmaker, matchmaker, make me a match,
Find me a find
Catch me a catch
Find me a perfect match."

But the daughters don't want to follow tradition. This is a new day and they want to marry for love, love that comes from the heart, their own heart, not from tradition. And so one by one, they each choose husbands and eventually their parent are brought around, except for the youngest daughter, for she, oh tragedy of all tragedies, has fallen in love with a man who is not Jewish. Her father must turn away from her. He no longer knows her, for he can no longer live without tradition. As much as he loves his daughter, tradition is his life, and even at the end of the story, when they must leave the country because of the war, he still cannot know her and he leaves in sorrow. Those traditions that were meant to keep the community strong and that did so in many ways had become more important than the commandments to love and to forgive.

And now one more story that I must talk to you about before we turn to discussion, and that is Huck Finn. All of us know Huck Finn, but if you are really familiar with all the details then I truly congratulate you, for that is a tangled web.

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But to recap briefly, Huck is a pal of Tom Sawyer, but where Tom is middle class, Huck is way down the social scale. He is beaten repeatedly by his drunk of a father and finally adopted by the Widow Douglas who puts all kinds of rules upon him, though at least she doesn't beat him. Her sister, Emily Watson, owns the slave, Jim, and eventually Jim and Huck decide to escape together on a raft on the Mississippi. Their plan is to get onto the Ohio River and make it to a free state but they miss the opening to the river and continue on down the Mississippi.

Now all this time, Huck and Jim are the greatest of friends. They help each other, they depend upon one another, they watch out for each other. There are just the two of them; neither of them has another ally. Huck is aware, however, that there is something a bit wrong with what he is doing. He knows that Jim is the property of Miss Watson, the sister of the Widow Douglas who has adopted him, and he has in his pocket a piece of paper that lays out that matter should they ever get to Ohio, that states that Jim is a slave and belongs to Emily Watson and is breaking the law by running away to Ohio. That is he has in his mind that he should not break with the tradition, the law, nor his debt to his adopted family by letting Jim go free without giving notice to the authorities.

At the same time, they are friends, he and Jim. And, every night on the raft when he is meant to be sleeping and Jim keeping watch, he hears Jim weeping for his children who have been sold down river. Every night Jim cries and calls their names and slowly Huck comes to realize that this is a man that he is on the raft with, not a piece of wood or iron or land that belongs to Miss Watson, but a human being. This comes not as a revelation, but just seeps into his consciousness, and eventually, Huck says, "Guess I'll just have to go to hell" and he tears up the piece of paper. Because Huck has come to realize that his love for Jim is a stronger tie than any attachment that he has for the law or tradition that extends from slavery. And he has learned that from his experience.

Now Jesus is saying something of the same thing for he tells the Pharisees and the scribes and all of the rest of us too that we must be willing to test the authenticity of our faith and our life and when they come up lacking, to discard them in favor of new ways of thinking and behaving. Jesus did not live with the expressed purpose of destroying the traditions of his society, but at heart of his message, his life and his teaching, one finds a deep personal openness and freedom, a liberality of spirit. And it is this to which we must keep returning, over and over, as we find institutions becoming increasingly rigid.

Surely there is an importance in tradition, in law, in format but they do not take precedence over love and mercy and justice. As individuals, as people of thought and spirit, we must take our responsibilities seriously. It is not enough to follow the rules if those rules takes us away from what we know to be right - from the love of family, as in the case of "Fiddler on the Roof"; from the bonds of friendship as in the case of Huck Finn and Jim; and certainly with all the myriad dilemmas facing us as citizens today. Remember what is said is said in James, that we read today,

"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

And I do not think that we are limited to orphans and widows, nor are we meant to isolate ourselves from what is going on in the world. Rather I think it is that we must be paying rather close attention, and choosing the paths that we know to be right from the voice of our heart and not from tradition.

