

In Defense and Challenge of Tradition – Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Sermon prepared and preached by Rev. Don Hammond
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He was an old man. He walked slowly with a cane, and for him to ascend three steps to the chancel, he needed the help of what appeared to be two young bodyguard-looking men. I was puzzled because he looked and spoke like a leftover from the pre integration days of the old South – short hair and a scowl. If anyone suited the stereotypical look of a hard-nosed, redneck Mississippian, it was he! I was puzzled because the two young men who helped him climb the stairs had long hair and earrings. They took their place in chairs, one on the old man's right and the other on his left. Perhaps they were there to protect him, perhaps because of the words he would say. As it turned out, the two men were musicians. The old man's name was Will Campbell, a storyteller, and in the early 90s of his life. He told several stories in his deep Mississippi twang, but the one I remember most was about his days as a soldier in the Pacific theater of WWII.

Campbell explained that he was a medic assigned to a field hospital in the Philippines. One day there was a shooting. A ten-year-old boy had tried to run away with a stolen piece of bread, and was shot for the theft as he ran. Campbell was nearby and grabbed the bleeding boy and ran with him to the hospital. With him was an army sergeant who frequently let it be known that he was a Christian. The surgeon immediately attended to the boy, but the wounds were fatal, and he died on the table while Campbell and the other soldier watched. Campbell said the surgeon, after a strong but futile effort laid down his surgical tools and, in disgust at what happened, said these words, and I quote: "All for a God-damned piece of bread."

Campbell became ill and ran into the forest with the other soldier following him. The good Christian soldier found Campbell on a rock throwing up and said; "I know you are upset but you must find a way to forgive that surgeon's misuse of God's holy name."

I suspect God cried on that day for both the needless loss of a young life, and for ignoring the important and magnifying the trivial. I suspect God wept that day not for

God's name being used in vain but for the needless destruction of a wonderful creation of God's handiwork.

Jesus was confronted by the religious police of his day because of what Jesus allowed his disciples to get away with. It was the tradition of the religious community to follow the laws of cleanliness. Such laws were not necessarily bad. Even today we understand the importance of washing hands frequently to prevent the spread of germs. Go into any grocery store, and hand wipes are available to clean both hands and the cart handle. There is nothing offensive about such precautions. In the time of Jesus, however, germs were not the motivation for cleanliness. The motivation was to represent purity of heart, mind, and soul in the encounter with God.

Jesus must have observed the tradition, because there is no accusation directed toward Jesus about un-cleanliness. The religious police directed their concern toward the disciples, and wondered what kind of leader Jesus was to not confront the disciples' inattention to the traditions and laws of the faith. Interesting, though Jesus observed the tradition, he seemed to not exhibit any compulsion to require his disciples to do the same. Instead of challenging his disciples, he challenged the challengers. He did it with these words:

"Listen to me and understand this: nothing that goes into a person from outside can defile that person; no, it is the things that come out of a person that defile."

Being an interim pastor, one of the responsibilities I occasionally need to accept is the challenge of confronting practices within the life of the congregation. If I were to give advice to a new pastor, included in my advice would be to walk very carefully when considering a challenge to two specific traditions of the church, for both can turn into an enormous problem that you may wish you never opened. Congregational battles can grow and pastors can lose their jobs by advocating the changing of times for worship, and changing the hymn-books. I have learned over the years that if either of those needs changing, then the movement must have its roots firmly grounded in the people of the congregation.

When I was in Hawaii, there were four worship services every Sunday morning. Two of them were in the sanctuary. One of those services was lightly attend and, because

of the continuous worship hours, there was no time slot for adult Christian education. The concern was addressed with much congregational input, and the decision was made to eliminate one worship service and adjust the time of the other, so that it would be one half hour earlier. I cannot imagine the process being handled any better for that change than as it was handled there. A couple in the church left the congregation with the explanation that the change was too significant for them to accept.

When the tradition becomes the sacred, then the words of challenge that Jesus directed to those gathered around him become alive: it is not the things that go in that defile, it is what comes out.

After 1,500 years, the Church developed many strong traditions. It was the challenge of the traditions of the Church that the Great Reformation was built upon. The tool that made the Reformation possible was something that today we don't even give a thought toward – the printing press. Before the printing press, very few other than the wealthy and clergy were able to read. When print became available, people developed reading skills and were ripe for challenging Church traditions that were not Biblical.

Now, 500 years later, there are traditions that have evolved and are identified as Biblical, but would be well suited for a challenge.

-This past week, a visitor from a quasi-religious organization visited me. I am somewhat familiar with the organization he represented, and I know that his ambition is to be granted a Sunday in this pulpit to present his cause. I knew that he would be persistent, therefore I chose to explain why such a moment would not be granted under my leadership. I explained that we are an Open and Affirming congregation and denomination, and that we place no obstacles and have no religious police to eliminate people that are often made unwelcome in both pew and pulpit in other church bodies. I further explained that his organization follows traditions that I consider reprehensible and unbiblical. He asked what that might be and I followed with “Do you include women in your organization?” “Oh, yes, we do now”. Knowing this is a recent change I said “wonderful. Do you send the women to speak in pulpits?” Well, “no, we don't do that,” he responded. Those are new traditions, and limits that not even Jesus affirmed. In truth, Jesus was clear and emphatic about the effusive love and inclusion that God offers for all God's creation. We have no right to place limits where God does not place limits. Many

of the traditions of the Church do not come as much from the time or mouth of Jesus as they come from the culture that goes back to those before us who are long since gone. Sometimes traditions must be examined and challenged. Come back to me when you challenge and adjust those new traditions. Come back when you can embrace the effusive and undeniable love that was given to us, and that we are called to reproduce and pass on to others. Come back when your traditions are much older and more faithful to the eternal embrace of Jesus of all that God has made.

The Great Reformation was a good thing because bad traditions were challenged, resisted and removed. Sometimes I find myself wondering if and when we will have another Great Reformation, for it appears to be a time when some traditions need to be challenged, resisted, and removed.

Jesus said: *“This people pays me lip-service, but their heart is far from me: their worship of me is in vain, for they teach as doctrines the commandments of men. You neglect the commandment of God, in order to maintain the tradition of men.”*

It must happen. I only wonder when, where and who will start it? Could it be here, now, and us? When will it start?

Amen.