

“Traditions” / Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 & James 1:17-24, 27 / 2 September 2012

The people ask Jesus, “Why don’t you and your disciples respect our traditions, like hand washing?” You’ve got to admit, it’s not such a bad habit. And Jesus responds, “You and your human traditions!” For Jesus is not impressed with our finest customs. What he loves most is a genuine, heartfelt faith.

Ah, those customs, traditions, time-honored practices! When I was living in Cameroon, Africa, I often found myself confronted by a whole host of unfamiliar customs that dated back to ancient times. Some of them I liked, and some of them took time to embrace. I liked the way people shook hands with each other using both hands. They would stand respectfully and brace their right hand with their left hand, as if just the honor of shaking your hand was so great that their right hand alone couldn’t do the job; it needed support from the left. I kind of liked the way friends felt free to hold each other’s hands while walking down the street. It was hard for me to get used to, but once I got past my self-consciousness, it was fine. I liked how, in my part of Africa, you weren’t allowed to leave without a gift. Whenever you’ve been visiting someone in their home, and you decide to take your leave, the host insisted on always sending you away with a present. A rack of bananas, a pineapple, even a few francs...but usually the gift was a chicken. It always happened the same way. You stand up to go. Your host protests that you just got there. You sit back down. A while later, you stand up again. Your host protests again, but this time with a little less firmness in his voice. Finally, the youngest child in the house is called into the room, and your host tells that child to go out into the yard and catch you a chicken. Now, these are truly free-range chickens. And it could prolong your visit by a full half-hour if that chicken plays hard to get! Many a time I was in such a hurry to leave that I joined in the chicken hunt myself. And after you take your leave from a Cameroonian home, it’s a tradition that your host has to accompany you at least as far as the first bridge on your walk home.

Of course, not all the traditions were so nice. I was never able to get used to the unshakable tradition that students had to stand whenever their teacher entered the room. It was disconcerting to me, every time I walked into my classroom, to see forty African youths, all of them taller than me, jumping to attention, as if I were a judge entering the courtroom. I always cringed with embarrassment.

My least favorite tradition of all had to do with eating meat. Early on in my Africa years, I had a firm commitment to eat anything that an African host placed in front of me. I knew that they were poor people, and that they spent enormous sums of money to entertain me well. And so, I determined early on that I would never turn up my nose at their food—even if I knew very well that it could make me sick...which it sometimes did. But in some regions, it was the tradition to butcher any animal that could be had in order to entertain a guest. The animal would be cooked, and when at table, the guest would be offered...the head. On one such occasion I sat down to table and was offered the head of an animal whose hand I would not shake, whose fur I would most definitely not pet. (It was a rat.) But fortunately, I had done my homework before going to Africa. I had read in a book that if you’re ever given food that you absolutely do not want to eat, then simply pass it along to the oldest person at the table. Most African societies lavish hospitality on visitors, but they also venerate the elderly. Thanks to that book, I escaped a most unpleasant meal (and earned a few points) by humbly offering up my plate to an ancient little man, seated across the table.

I learned later in my Africa years that there's one magic phrase that can get you off the hook for all kinds of traditional expectations. You simply say, "Oh, it's not my habit." "Sorry, it's not my habit to eat the head." "It's not my habit to accept a chicken." "It's not my habit to make students rise when I enter the classroom." And so the only thing that can trump traditional customs is more traditions, for what is a habit but your own private tradition? The problem with time-honored practices is that some people find them inspiring and life-giving, but other people find them stifling and dull. Some traditions still ring with meaning and beauty all these years later, while other just make us go, "Huh?" Well, what are some of your favorite traditions? Christmas traditions, Easter traditions, family traditions. And here we are, a traditional religious organization, with creeds, and liturgies, and customs going back as far as Abraham—what do we do with Jesus' stark rebuke for human traditions?

In this part of the Mark's gospel, Jesus is coming into more and more frequent conflict with the traditional religious leaders of his day. He's the latest craze, a nine-day-wonder among the simple folk in his far-flung province of Galilee. Some say he can do magic. Rumors are afoot that he can heal diseases, and cast out demons—for everyone believed in such things in those days. People say that his words ring with poetry and power. His words reach into their souls and shine a light in deep, inner places that they didn't even know existed. He opens whole new vistas on life for the downtrodden of his day. Jesus is just a vagabond, wandering from village to village, teaching in synagogues, in open fields, on beaches. The funny thing is that there's nothing entirely new in Jesus' teachings. His sermons echo the best of Torah, the religious tradition at hand: love your neighbor, forgive each other, share what you have, just be good to each other. But that's the thing about old truths: they sound new when you apply them to the situation at hand. It is the curse of all religions that we eventually seem to forget why we do the things we do. A religious person rises up with great passion and compelling truths. Abraham and his covenant, Moses and his Law, Jesus and his Great Commandment. People are drawn to that person. In time, the visionaries hand their movements over to men and women of lesser passions, and the movement becomes another institution with its rules, and its dogmas, and its traditions. How do we get back to all that's good about faith?

Long ago, when we were living up north, and Michelle spent Wednesday evenings in Pittsburgh, working on her MSW, I used to sing in the church choir. They practiced on Wednesday evenings, and the church was right next-door, and so I took the kids to play in the aisles while I practiced with the choir. It gave me something to do when I was home alone with the kids. But I'll tell you, it was more than that. I'm not much of a singer, and our music director was a demanding lady; she wasn't afraid to stop the rehearsal in mid-song to stare daggers at me if I hit a wrong note. And yet, I came to know why people give up so much free time to sing in church choirs. There's another place where you sometimes go when you're singing. There are times when the music, or the lyrics, or the combined voices all join to give you goose bumps. And you really do feel a sense of wonder, and beauty, and splendor that religion really should be about. Every once in a while when you sing, you have an experience of God that keeps you coming back for more. Just for a moment, you glimpse the transcendence of the Holy. It fades all too quickly, but music isn't the only thing that can get you there. For some people, stories can do it. For other people, poetry can do it. For other people, it's nature or even rituals. What transports you into the thrilling, calming presence of God?

This is how religion got started in the first place. Early people had unexplainable, profoundly meaningful encounters with the Sacred. They had visions, and dreams, and ecstatic experiences. They tried to reproduce those experiences and make them available to other people. Then the Type-A personalities came along and decided that there really ought to be rules governing these encounters. And others came along and decided that these holy experiences ought to follow a certain pattern. Then we had wall-builders, and label-makers, and before you know it, there were teams, and competing truth claims, and crusades, and religious wars. Over the centuries, people built up casings, and shells, and fortresses to protect their vision of God. Meanwhile, the God they were trying to protect, often slips out the back door and leaves the empty shells standing, hollow.

Sometimes we forget why we do what we do, but we continue to do it anyway because...it's what we do. Jesus is not saying that our religious traditions are bad. He's simply saying that traditions become an end in themselves when people forget their purpose. When people forget the joyful experience of God that is at the heart of all the great religious traditions, when those traditions themselves obscure God's justice and love rather than clarifying them, then those traditions need to be reconsidered.

You probably heard the story of the woman who always cut the end off the ham before putting it in the roaster. It's become something of an urban myth, though my high school social studies teacher claimed that the woman in question was his mother-in-law. One Easter Day, her adult daughter asked her, "Mom, why do you always cut the end off the ham and give it to the dog?" The mother said, "I don't know. My mother always did. I always just assumed the end of the ham wasn't edible." And so they went to grandma and asked, "Grandma, why did you always cut the end off the ham when you put it in the roaster?" And grandma replied, "I had to cut the end off because my pot was too small." Sometimes we don't know why we do the things we do. Practices develop into rituals and traditions, and the original purpose of them is lost to us.

I'm not saying that we need to ditch all the accoutrements of church and walk around in robes and sandals like Jesus. I'm not saying that there's anything wrong with our traditions, our committees, our classes, and buildings, and budgets. I am saying that we need to carry on our churchly traditions with two questions in mind: Do our religious practices make us better people, happier, kinder, gentler? Do they make the world a better place? If the answer is no, then perhaps we've forgotten something along the way. For everything we do together, everything we build together, everything we dream together as a church, it's all about those occasional moments of grace that open new vistas on the world for us, placing new possibilities within our reach. All that the church does is about this better vision of life that occasionally grasps us, and transports us, the new creation that is possible in your life and in our world.

I think it's fair to say that the world is full of churches that place their traditions above people. There are traditions to govern whom we will baptize, whom we will allow to the Table, whom we will invite to serve as elders, deacons, and ministers. It seems to me that Jesus is simply saying, "People above traditions." Do our traditions make us better people, happier, kinder, gentler? Do they make the world a better place? If our answer to these questions is "no," then our religious traditions might be failing us. If our answer is "yes," then I don't care what our traditions are; they're working. Our age old customs can be good, if they reflect the kindness of the God they're meant to glorify, and if they never become more important than the people we are meant to love. Amen.