Matters of the Heart

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August 29, 2021

Traditions. As families, cultures, societies, churches do we not have multiple traditions that are passed down through generations or that we follow year after year.

As a few examples: Fourth of July celebrations with fireworks, Thanksgiving dinner with turkey and Christmas with trees and lights. I imagine all of us have some tradition that is meaningful to us.

Some of my favorite traditions have centered more around Christmas. As a child Christmas Eve was special, every year the children in our family would start our Christmas eve by being with my grandparents, on my mom’s side, driving around the neighborhood and town viewing the many Christmas lights and decorations. When we returned home there were gifts and toys that somehow just appeared. Then, as a family we would go to the midnight church service where I was especially awed by the life size manger scene of the holy family, surrounded by live Christmas trees with multiple colored lights. After the service at home we would have ham sandwiches together made by mom. I always enjoyed those sandwiches and that time together.

As an adult Christmas eve has remained my favorite tradition, as here at the church we celebrate with the lighting of the candles, the beauty of the poinsettias, the message, communion, and music These traditions have been very meaningful to me.

Traditions are important as they can contribute to our sense of belonging. They can strengthen family life, and reinforce our values as freedom, faith and much more. However, when the doing of the tradition becomes the focus, and the purpose for which it was intended has been lost, does it not need to be re-evaluated, and the purpose somehow restored or the tradition changed

In our scripture passage for today, we have 3 groups of people that Jesus addresses, the scribes and Pharisees, the crowd and the disciples .

Our first group, The scribes and Pharisees have come from Jerusalem and have gathered around Jesus. In doing so they notice that Jesus’s disciples are eating without washing their hands. They question Jesus and say “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands”. Or unwashed hands:

Now this handwashing was not done for sanitary reasons but was a ceremonial cleansing, a ritual that had to be done in a certain ways. For example holding the hands in a cupped position and having water poured into them. It was based originally on Old Testament requirement that was for priests and their households when they ate food that was dedicated to God. This priestly requirement was then expanded and extended to all Jewish persons by an oral tradition which was passed down through generations. Although, The original intent may have been a way for people to show reverence and holiness before God, by Jesus’s response we can tell that somewhere, the practice became more of the focus and not the God for whom it was created.

In Jesus’ response to the question presented by these scribes and Pharisees, he calls them hypocrites and then quotes from 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 doctrines.’ And then adds You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

Can you imagine what these scribes and Pharisees felt like when they heard these words. But let’s return to the question made by the scribes and Pharisee. Could there possibly have been a challenge in the tone of voice in which it was presented. A tone of voice that might be heard as saying “what right do your disciples have to disregard what we teach? Could the scribes and Pharisees be concerned about losing their authority? Were they envious of Jesus who was performing miracles and healing the sick? Were they concerned about Jesus’s lack of support of their oral traditions?

If we look at previous chapters in this gospel of Mark, we see that this is not the first time Jesus was confronted by some scribes and/or Pharisees. His disciples plucked grain as they were going through a grain field on the Sabbath. He healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath both of which were considered unlawful to be done on the Sabbath. He said to a paralytic you sins are forgiven which the scribes questioned in their hearts and considered blasphemy for only God could forgive sins. Jesus saw this in their hearts and not only forgave the sins of the paralytic but also healed the man to show them that he had the authority to forgive sins. In this passage Jesus saw too what was in the hearts of the ones who questioned him. and did not directly answer the question but changed the discourse to address the condition of their hearts.

Jesus then turns to the crowd, our second group, some of whom may have heard what has been said, some who may have heard parts of what has been said and others who may not have heard any of the conversation. He says to them “Listen to me all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. And just leaves them with that statement. I imagine that many were somewhat baffled by the statement wondering what it meant.

Our 3rd group of people, the disciples confirm this lack of understanding that we might see in the crowd in that after they enter the house they ask Jesus what this statement means and Jesus responds and says “Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile (make a person unclean) since it enters not the heart but the stomach and goes out into the sewer. It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart that evil intentions come. Then Jesus lists a number of things as envy, slander, pride, murder, adultery and more. And not an all inclusive list.

So what can we take away from this passage.

Yes, there is the matter of traditions. Rituals, activities that have been done year after year or possibly over generations. The questions we might ask in all our traditional activities is have they lost their initial purpose. Have they become just something we do because they have always been done. Do they need to be reaffirmed in their purpose, do they need to be changed or do they simply need to be discontinued so there is room for growth or for something new.

We might also take away the thought that when we are presented with information that may not be heard completely and/or is not completely understood to dig deeper to clarify and learn as the disciples did when they asked Jesus about the parable, about what it meant.

But more importantly, this passage leads us to consider the condition of our hearts. All that we might call spiritual rituals and traditions do not cleanse the heart of sin, of thoughts and actions that hurt the heart of God, that draw us away from the one who created us to be in relationship with him. Yet in God’s infinite love and mercy, God still loves us in the midst of all the messiness. He waits as the Father waited for the prodigal son for the one he loves to repent and return

Jesus’s confrontations with some, not all of the scribes and Pharisee eventually led to his death on a cross outside Jerusalem and to his resurrection on the third day. God loves this world. He gave his only son. The love of God shown through Jesus heals and cleanses the wounds, the hurts and desires of the human heart that lead to thoughts and actions that separate us from a loving and holy God.

We have so much in our society and culture at this time that hurts the heart of God, the violence, the labeling, the name calling, the divisions of people by ideologies and race, the unwillingness to listen, to see another’s point of view, the placing of wants and desires, and the use of power and control above the greatest commandment to love God above all things and neighbor as oneself. It is wearisome and it is overwhelming.

But, As we search our own hearts can we say that we are free from all sin. The scriptures say that all like sheep have gone astray, each to his own way, but even in those moments when our hearts betray us, we have the hope of a savior to whom we can say “Create in me a clean heart, O God and renew a right spirit within me, restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Let us pray

Holy God, to You we lift up our eyes, for our help comes from You. In the midst of chaos, uncertainty and betrayals of the heart, you are with us. Your love calls to us, forgives us and guides us. You grant us peace and renewal as we rest in you. Your grace is amazing, your goodness overwhelming. Be always the love of our hearts, ever, only all that You are. Amen.