

Trinity 12

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Traditionalism is the living religion of the dead or the dead religion of the living. Tradition imagines that nothing worthwhile will ever again be done for the first time because everything worth doing has already been done. Therefore, traditionalism repeats what it imagined always was and what it imagines always will be. The problem with tradition for tradition's sake is a terminal case of spiritual heart disease.

In our Gospel reading, a delegation of religious leaders makes their way from Jerusalem to investigate Jesus Christ, just as they had done previously (see Mark 3:22). The last time they came, they called Jesus an instrument of the devil. This time, they observe some of Jesus' disciples eating food without first washing their hands. The gospel writer Mark, whose target audience is the Romans, explains for his intended readers an extreme and minority tradition within the Pharisaic tradition to make his point.

For many, cultural tradition has become the master. Tradition is the only reason they keep repeating some things. They practice their traditions even when those traditions hold them back from becoming what they are designed to be and what they can be. Life as they know it with all its traditions is leaving them behind. The same is true for these Pharisees mentioned by Mark.

Before we criticize the Jews for their traditions, however, let us remember that there are people in the Christian church who also are trapped in tradition's snares. Ask them and they tell you that they do not always know why they do the things they do except that they inherited their practices and believe things have always been done that way.

In a certain country church, a new priest followed one who, prior to retirement, had served that congregation faithfully for nearly thirty years. The predecessor was greatly beloved. The new priest took up his charge with a zeal for doing everything well. He was not long in his new post, however, before he had a sense that some of his new parishioners were not especially happy with him. Concerned, he sought the counsel of a kindly lay leader he believed he could trust. "I'm not sure why," the new priest confessed, "but I have a feeling not everyone is happy with me." "Father," the layman replied, "it is how you conduct the Holy communion service." "What am I doing wrong?" the priest asked. "It is not so much what you are doing wrong, but what you are not doing."

Now, the young newcomer really was puzzled. "I follow the liturgy exactly the way I was taught to do it in theological college and as it is prescribed in the Prayer Book," he said. "Well," said the kindly lay leader, "that may be. However, your predecessor always went over and laid his hands on the radiator before he gave the chalice to the people." "Lay hands on the radiator!" the young minister exclaimed, "I've never heard of that before but I'll check it out."

Puzzled, he called his predecessor and said, "I've been here just one month, and I am in trouble. Please help me." "In trouble?" his predecessor replied, "How are you in trouble so soon?" "It has something to do with the way you laid hands on the radiator before you served the communion chalice to the people," replied the young man. The older man laughed. "I did that," he said, "because my old polyester cassock created so much static electricity that I feared giving an electric shock to one of the people. So, I always touched the radiator to discharge that static electricity!"

Talk about the Church of the Holy Radiator! The people were so caught up in a meaningless action by their former pastor that they assumed it to be a primary part of their religious

heritage.

So it is with the Pharisees who come to keep an eye on Jesus. Jesus, however, is more than a match for them. He tells them that their quasi-religious rituals have replaced their relationship with God. Like many, they are slaves to tradition. Jesus says the problem is not in their actions but in their hearts, “These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.” You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men. — Mark 7:6-8

The human heart has always had a capacity to extend and twist God’s word, and rearrange it. We see it first in the Garden of Eden when Eve exaggerates God’s direction to the first couple. The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’ ” — Genesis 3:2-3 God had said nothing about touching the tree, only that they must not eat it (see Genesis 2:17). The unredeemed heart, left to its own devices, will inevitably twist God’s word into a noose for its own neck and cheat its owner of God’s best for life. The only way to avoid a cheating heart is to know God’s word and live it out in our personal practices inside and outside the church.

Another problem these Pharisees have is the same problem that Pharisees have had in every generation, even this one. They imagine themselves to be something they are not. Jesus uses a very powerful name to expose them: “You hypocrites!” The Greek word for hypocrite means to act a part or to pretend. In short, Jesus calls the Pharisees great pretenders. No matter how sincere they and their religious rituals seem on the surface, they are mere play actors, Jesus tells them. There are two lessons for us here: First, we must see that simply saying the right words does not constitute true spiritual worship. Jesus, quoting Isaiah, says, “These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (v. 6). One may attend the services of the church, sing the hymns and psalms of the faith, recite its creeds, partake of the sacraments, listen to the sermons, yet still disconnected. Nicodemus and Saul of Tarsus, both of whom were regarded as religious leaders before their own people. Yet, both were spiritually disconnected from what God was about in Jesus. It is an old saying, yet still true: Being in the church does not make someone a Christian anymore than being in a garage makes one a car! Only the redemptive work of Christ can make us true followers of Jesus.

The second truth brought home in Christ’s reply is found in Mark 7. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men. You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men. — Mark 7:7-8

That is the difference between theism and me-ism. We either worship God for God’s sake or worship God for our sake. The fact that we attend a certain church and leave feeling good does not necessarily guarantee us that worship in that church pleases God. Real worship is not measured by how it pleases me but by how it measures up to God’s word.

Today we use the term “seeker-sensitive” to define certain styles of worship. We must be alert to the inherent danger in this approach to worship. In our desire to be “seeker-sensitive,” we must be careful to remember that our primary focus is not on the “seekers” but on the Saviour, the Lord of the church. We dare not dilute the scriptural elements of worship just to please a crowd. True worship focuses only on Jesus. To promote the “seeker” over God is a direct violation of the first commandment (see Exodus 20:3). The only way to be God’s is to become God’s in God’s own way. Because “the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure” (Jeremiah 17:9), it is possible, as the Pharisees often demonstrated, to believe in our heart that we are serving God and be dead wrong.

But there is hope! God promises, “I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve” (Jeremiah 17:10). When we genuinely come through Christ’s cross, with all we are and have, God meets us and cleanses our concealing heart.

From within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man “unclean.” — Mark 7:21-23

If only the Pharisees could have seen what Blaise Pascal saw and recorded in his *Lettres Provinciales*, “Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.” What a change it would have made to their attitude and actions! What Jesus observes in the Pharisees we see in our day in the Taliban. But wait, do we not also, in many places, see it in the church that bears Jesus’ name? The heart of the matter really is the heart of the matter because the heart is, finally, the soul’s mirror. When the heart is right with God, then the life is right with God. Contrasting what the Pharisees taught, Jesus says that it is not what we see on the outside but what proceeds from inside us that tells who we really are. We are cleansed from the inside out and not as the Pharisees taught from the outside

It is, finally, the difference between religion and relationship that Christ addresses with the Pharisees. The word religion is from a Latin root meaning to keep on repeating the same ritual. The Pharisees had religion. They did the same meaningless actions repeatedly and thoughtlessly. Christ, on the other hand, invites us into a relationship with his Father and himself. Relationship is a connecting or binding experience that joins people as though they are one. Jesus invites us to bind our heart to his heart that we may be one for the Father’s glory.

He still answers those who echo David’s prayer, “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10). For everyone who makes that their prayer, he promises, “I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 11:19). If today your heart is divided, come to him with all your heart. Amen.