



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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SEPTEMBER 2, 2012
THE FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

What's Your Religion Worth?
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23; James 1:17-27

Have you ever found yourself caught between tradition and a hard place? It happens all the time, but I suppose the most familiar time is during Christmas. We have friends who have had to deal with such weighty theological issues as: Do you put up the Christmas tree early in December or wait until Christmas Eve? Does everyone have to wait until Christmas morning to open presents or do you allow the kids to open one gift on Christmas Eve? Can you put colored lights on the tree or only white ones? Are homemade decorations allowed or only Hallmark certified ornaments? And when does the tree come down? Do you observe the Christmas season and wait until Epiphany on the sixth day of January or is it bad luck to have the tree up on New Year's Day?

"Tradition!" sang Tevye the dirt-poor farmer in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Tradition! It gives us some guidance as we navigate the waters of important life events. Tradition provides us with stability and boundaries. It ties us to the past while helping us into the future. Tradition instills identity, security, and stability. Tradition can also get us into trouble.

It was no different in first century Palestine than it is now. In fact, the Jews were strong in the department of tradition. They had rules by the hundreds that would keep the traditions alive lest you temporarily forgot who you were and how you were to behave. They had traditions about worship and marriage and work. There were traditions about marking land boundaries, welcoming strangers, and settling disputes. They had traditions about festivals and food preparation and, yes, washing hands.

The Pharisees were only doing their job when they asked politely (if with a bit of sarcasm) why Jesus' disciples ate with "defiled" hands. They were trying to make a point without being so direct. I am reminded of the time my grandmother offered my cousin and me some cookies. As we each grabbed a handful and happily began stuffing them into our mouths, she very kindly said, "You're welcome." We kind of nodded (which helped with the chewing) and kept munching away. "You're welcome," she repeated, smiling sweetly. We nodded again, a little more vigorously in case she had missed it the first

time. “You’re welcome,” she said a little more intensely and with a higher tone. My cousin and I looked at each other a little panicked. Was this the first sign of Grandma getting senile? It was the third time she had told us we were welcome and we had acknowledged it each time. Finally, the light dawned in our dense and sugar-overloaded brains and we hung our heads a little and mumbled, “Thank you.” “You’re welcome,” she said one last time as she kissed the tops of our heads and patted us on our way. Lesson learned. Tradition preserved: always say “Thank you” when someone gives you something.

It appeared that the Pharisees were only trying to help. It was a long-practiced Jewish tradition that one washed his or her hands before eating. There was a belief that an evil spirit could rest on one’s hands at night. If it was not washed away it could sit on the food and make one ill. Therefore large jugs of water were kept for purification. It had to be dipped out with a jar or ladle which held an amount equivalent to one and a half egg shells. The hands were held up and water poured over them so that the hands were cleansed to the wrist and no polluted water ran back onto the fingers. This ritual had its merits, but gradually it came to be about what made you a good Jew and what set you apart from other people, say . . . those heathen Samaritans or Romans! For Jesus, however, the controversy between him and the Pharisees was not at all about healthy practices or even spiritual purity. It was about the vital difference between rote action and the intent of the heart.

The Pharisees loved their rules. Their guidelines provided structure to life and gave them something to do when pointing out ways in which other people broke the rules. Jesus would have nothing to do with it, however. He reached back to the beloved prophet Isaiah who had faced the same issue generations before: “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,” warned the prophet. The problem, Jesus said, is not whether people eat with dirty hands. The problem is whether they live with clean hearts.

Certainly the dietary laws existed for a reason just as rules about politeness guide our relationships with one another. Jesus knew, however, that if one ate without ritually washing his or her hands, it would not make them unclean in God’s eyes. The Pharisees were trying to make the point that Jesus’ disciples were not good Jews. They could not find any legitimate cause to criticize them so they focused on ritual laws. Since the disciples

weren't observant Jews they suggested, their teachings must also be suspect. In other words, Jesus and his followers were not good Jews and should not be trusted. But Jesus shut down the Pharisees on the spot by reminding them that there is a tremendous difference between the commandments of God and human traditions.

Years later the writer of the Epistle of James echoed Jesus. His letter is all about the integrity of our faith and how our actions must reflect our words. "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves" (1:22), he warned his readers. He compared people like the Pharisees, folks who listen and even say the right words but who do not follow through with their actions, to someone who gets dressed in the morning, looks approvingly in the mirror but then walks away and forgets what he is wearing. James makes a startling observation. Using gossip and unkind speech as an example, he notes that anyone who thinks he is religious and yet does not bridle his tongue holds to a religion that is worthless. In other words, folks like the Pharisees who are more concerned with rules, rituals, and appearance rather than the heart of God are wasting their time on worthless religion.

What is our religion worth? James is not talking about how much money you and I give to the church. The worth of our religion is not about money. He is talking about how we live out our faith. That is religion. Religion is the way in which we live out our faith. According to James, a religion that is inconsistent with one's faith is worthless. What is your religion worth?

Followers of Jesus Christ have always been vulnerable to this question. The first disciples, the ones closest to Jesus, were the first to betray him. Peter denied that he even knew Jesus. Judas gave him into the hands of the Roman authorities. Quarrels erupted among the first Christians about who was being served and who was being neglected. Prejudice guided actions, jealousy overruled generosity, tradition impeded the spread of the Gospel. The Early Church was no different from the Present-day Church.

We must pay attention to the relationship between what we believe and what we do. It is a constant need—like washing our hands before we eat. After all, we are human with all of the tendencies that come with having feet of clay.

Wallace Bubar recently reminded me of the “six-point record system” envelopes that we Baptists once used for our weekly offering.¹ Some of you remember them, too. On the front there was a place to fill in your name and the amount of your offering, but there were also six boxes for you to check off the things you had done that week. You could note whether you had attended worship, brought your Bible to church with you, read your Bible each day, studied your Sunday School lesson, prayed each day, and, of course, given an offering.

I remember that for young children it was something of a contest to fill in each of the six boxes each week. I have to admit that there were numerous times when I hurriedly read a psalm or a parable so I could check off Bible reading, but later could not remember what I had written. Many times I counted saying the blessing at a meal as my prayer time. The other boxes were fairly easy to check off as well. None of it really required much effort.

Yet, we all felt like we had done something when we checked off those six boxes each week. As Rev. Bubar so honestly put it, that envelope was like “a spiritual scorecard”² where we could keep record of all the good things we had done that made us a better Christian week by week.

When I was in the young men’s DeMolay organization and meetings would get rowdy and tempers might rise, the officer in charge would bang the gavel and call out, “Attitude check!” To which the rest of us were supposed to reply, “DeMolay!” “What does it mean?” he would ask, and with voices raised in unison we would answer, “Brotherhood!” That attitude check would remind us that we were all brothers first and foremost and should treat one another accordingly.

In response to the criticism of the Pharisees, Jesus suggested that from time to time we need to do an attitude check and remind ourselves of who we are and what is most important. Attitude check: Christians! What does it mean? Love God and one another! According to Jesus, that is the essence of true religion. James agreed.

We are besieged on all sides by competing ideologies that clamor for our allegiance. We are assaulted from every direction by expressions of faith

¹Wallace W. Bubar, “Reflections on the Lectionary: James 1:17-27,” *The Christian Century* (August 22, 2012): 21.

²Bubar.

that will draw us off course. We are tempted day by day to follow convention and tradition and human nature. What is more helpful: to automatically read a passage of scripture each day without giving it thought or to take time to read and ponder a passage that has meaning for your life? What has greater value: to run down a list of people who have needs and say their names to God or to prayerfully reflect on each one and figure a way to offer our support as well? What is more meaningful to God: for us to automatically come to church whenever we are in town or to plan to come to worship with grateful and open hearts?

Traditions are important and healthy practices are wise to follow, but our religion needs to be an honest expression of what we believe. Otherwise it is worthless. We are to be doers of the word and not hearers only. It is not an easy task, but it is worth the effort for when we do so, we follow in the way of Christ who valued us so much that he gave himself completely for us—and still does. What's your religion worth?

September 2, 2012

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We know that creation is your gift to us, O God, and we recognize what a good gift it is. You have fashioned a world of contrasting climates and contours, of vegetation, animals, and birds. The seas are full of creatures both great and small and the air is filled with the songs of innumerable birds. You have provided for us to have safe homes, abundant food, and opportunities to experience you at work in the world. For all of these gifts we offer our thanks, O God, and pray that we will never take your world for granted.

As we marvel at the world, we also recognize that danger is a part of creation. Many people in our country have suffered because of drought, fire, wind, and flood. We pray that they will receive the help they need to rebuild their homes and businesses, heal their wounds, grieve their losses, and help their neighbors. Give them courage and encouragement, we pray, and remind them that they are not alone.

We pray for our own friends and family and for ourselves in times when we need a healing touch and supportive grace. Bless all who are ill, O God, and bring to them resources that will indeed heal. Bless our friends whose days are often filled with sorrow and open their eyes to the ongoing joy of life. Guide the paths of all who are making significant decisions and open the hearts of each one who is examining who they are.

We offer prayers of support for our students, teachers, and staff as they return to school. Provide what they will need to succeed in teaching and learning this year. Open minds to new understandings about life and open hearts to new friendships that might be made. Enable learning to take place that will go beyond math and science and language arts and encompass openness, tolerance, acceptance, and interdependence. Teach us all to be more open to one another, we pray.

Draw us to this table, O God, and remind us why we are here. Open our hearts to the reality of your sacrifice and the possibilities of our salvation. Bless us all, we pray, with renewed awareness of your presence and commitment to your ministry which is also ours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.