

Pentecost 15/Proper 17 September 2, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church  
Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; Psalm 15; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15,  
21-23

If you've ever used a restroom in a store, you'll have seen this sign: "Employees must wash their hands before returning to work."

Notice it says "must." This isn't optional. As with the speed of light, it's not just a good idea, it's the law! Failure to wash your hands as an employee is a violation of every local health department's sanitation regulations!

I can't help being struck by Mark's description of what the Pharisees – in fact, he says, all Jews – do when it comes to cleanliness! We now know they were right! Washing things is a healthy response to germs and the threat of sickness.

Some scholars have argued that the Israelite prohibition on pork and shellfish comes from personal experience - they noticed that they were losing too many people to what we now know as Trichinosis; and when they lived in Canaan (ask me later about the origins of Israel in Canaan) they were losing too many people to shellfish poisoning as well. So they said "enough is enough! We're just gonna ban them! No more pork! No more shellfish!" From our 21<sup>st</sup> Century perspective, that seems like a logical response.

But that's a very 21<sup>st</sup> Century response! The ancients knew nothing about germs and bacteria. That's led other contemporary scholars to look for different reasons for why pork and shellfish were *verboten* for the Israelites. Yes, they may have observed you can get sick from eating them. But when you put these prohibitions together with other directives from the Torah - like the use of ritual baths - mikveh - it seems that note eating pork or shellfish had more to do with community identity. "We're different", those rules say, "so – unlike those other people who live in this area, and who seem to be a lot like us – we don't eat particular foods, and the foods we do eat we prepare in a unique way." They're called "purity laws" and purity doesn't mean free of germs! You can tell that by the fact that the water in mikveh baths was seldom changed - so you were going into a purity bath full of dirty water!

Hygiene, in other words, had little to do with purity. The food laws were about identity.

So Mark's mention of washing practices isn't about food but about identity. That means that when he records these *Big City* religious men - who represented a particular view of Jewish tradition - showing up in the boondocks of the Galilee, and asking about the behavior of Jesus and his disciples, they're not raising questions of good hygiene on Jesus' community's part either. They're wondering ***whether or not Jesus and his disciples are genuine people of faith who are trying to maintain the integrity of their faith tradition*** – whether or not they're "real Jews." Jesus' integrity and his whole message are being called into question in front of our eyes.

I think it's safe to say that Jesus loses his temper, here! If someone questioned your integrity, who would you feel?! That's why he calls these visitors who purport to be religious experts

hypocrites. And we might say today that Jesus then “went nuclear” – he called them blasphemers, and blasphemy in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century was a capital offense.

Here’s where that comes home for us: arguments over tradition can be some of the most vitriolic! People fight over traditions – in part, I suppose, because our traditions define who we are as human beings. You mess with traditions at your own risk!

One of the things that underscores is the importance of understanding tradition and traditions, and being clear what’s genuine and what’s not. There’s a difference, for instance, between a genuine, life-giving tradition - like the eucharist, for instance - and what’s “traditionalism” - which is largely doing something without any reflection or judgment, without wondering if it holds value or is destructive, simply because “we have always done it that way” - those words have jokingly been called “the seven last words of the church” - comparing them unfavorably to the seven last words of Jesus on the cross. Yes, “last words”!

That’s really what these religious purists are saying: “your behavior violates our traditions as people of faith.” And Jesus replies, in essence, “your traditions are unimportant if they violate the tradition that comes from God.” By way of illustration, Jesus lists those sorts of behavior that violate the Torah, and, in particular, violate the Ten Commandments, as an example of how the Pharisees particular brand of tradition *lacks religious integrity if it focuses mindlessly on externals*. Hear that again: *if it focuses mindlessly on externals*.

***Here’s an important thing: Jesus is not saying*** that tradition, or individual traditions, are, in and of themselves, bad. It’s clear, for instance, that Jewish purity traditions played a very important role in maintaining their sense of identity down the ages, so that, while many of the other nations and faiths surrounding them vanished, they endured. In that sense, Jewish traditions around the washing of hands and utensils was a good and positive thing – in fact it’s not unreasonable to argue that it was vital for their continued existence as a people. ***And that’s despite the health benefits!***

But, said Jesus, when you get locked into one way of seeing things, when you focus only on one way of interpreting faithful response, you’re in trouble.

Here’s some positive things about tradition for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.:

- ◆ Healthy tradition connects us with our forebears,
- ◆ Healthy tradition offers us structures and practices that support, and
- ◆ Healthy tradition allows us to preserve and pass on the core of our common faith to those who will come after us.

Simply put, healthy tradition offers a way of life; it provides us with guides to behavior and ways to think.

For those of us who embrace a reformed vision of faith in a rich liturgical setting, and a contemporary understanding of the bible, healthy tradition means embracing inclusion; it means seeing egalitarianism – equality – as the heart of our identity; it means continuing to celebrate our ability to disagree with each other but still stay in relationship and in community; it means not

checking our brains at the door, or thinking we can share in communion via TV – you get the picture!

There's a flip side. What tradition is not is this:

- ◆ The unthinking preserving unchanged of a set of practices handed down from our forebears
- ◆ The elevating of any form over it's content
- ◆ The elevating of things over people

In other words, genuine tradition is fluid not rigid, alive, not dead. Genuine tradition serves us, we do not serve tradition; that's what Jesus meant when, in another setting, that "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath." (Mark 2.27)

So that's a double -reminder to us: we must always pay attention to what we have received from those who have gone before us, but we're not bound to embrace the forms they found meaningful if they're less meaningful for us. Always question a tradition: the real, valuable ones can withstand it! And the ones that no longer serve will prove to be hollow. If we were so bound we would still be speaking Aramaic, or Greek, or Elizabethan English in our worship. Rather, every generation has to reinterpret our shared faith for itself, has to look for meaning anew, has to discover new ways and new languages and new forms that offer vitality and new life.

And, secondly, we are responsible for handing on to those who come after us the core of our faith about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth – that's essential. How it's expressed in any particular context is – or should be – as fluid as is appropriate for that context.

All of which adds some real contemporary energy to a biblical passage about washing your hands! And it raises a whole host of questions for every contemporary Christian community to explore as we face a changing future. And, by the way, this is not a commercial for the workshops I'm leading - but it could be! Amen.