

The Heart of the Matter

Matthew 15: 1-20

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.” He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ But you say that whoever tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,’ then that person need not honor the father. So, for the sake of your tradition, you nullify the word of God. You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

‘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.’ ”

Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.”

Watch the Seinfeld episode where Jerry observes the chef who is preparing his food forget to wash his hands after using the bathroom, and we might agree it is a bit gross. I mean, who in their mind would want to eat a meal prepared by someone who didn't wash up first. Kind of gross, right? The pharisees might be having a similar reaction as they watch the disciples eat without washing up first. It was so important culturally that it became a sacred ritual for staying clean. So the pharisee, perhaps grossed out by observing the disciples, decide they are going to raise the issue with Jesus.

At first glance it seems like the Pharisees have a point. It's important to wash our hands, isn't it? It is how we were raised. As kids we'd spend the afternoon playing outside. Riding bikes or playing basketball. When dinner was announced we'd come in all sweaty and what's the first thing we were told to do? Wash our hands! We spend time in the garden, or grab eggs from the chicken coop, or even exchanging cash at the store. And if we had a microscope looking at all the bacteria we've accumulated, we'd never forget! Remember during Covid the advice we were told? Wear a mask. Socially distance. And sing Happy Birthday two times as we scrubbed and lathered; and don't forget to sanitize just in case. Washing our hands protected us from contamination. It's the same expectation the Pharisee have. It's the same expectation Jerry Seinfeld has. It's the same expectation we have.

Well, how does Jesus respond? The question sparks a rebuke. Jesus pulls out his bible and blasts the Pharisee with a quote from Isaiah:

“You honor me with your lips,
but your hearts are far from me.”

It's a reference to how our devotion to God doesn't always translate into action. Jesus is peeling back the ritual to look at the intention. While washing our hands is a good sanitary practice, how

does it translate into being a holy person? And what good is a tradition if it becomes empty of its meaning? It has been known to happen. A bunch of us went to the Dash game on Friday. Before the game began someone skirts out into the field, grabs the microphone, and starts singing *The National Anthem*. The spectators rise to their feet. A hush falls over the crowd. People's ball caps come off. Hands get placed over the heart. Some of us sing like it's our opening hymn. It's a ritual of devotion to "the land of the free and the home of the brave." But when someone takes a knee it's because the lyrics ring hollow and the words don't line up with the actions. It's about the heart of the matter. Yet the critics come out: "Why do your disciples not respect the tradition?" So Jesus reacts when the Pharisee become critical. He says, "Why do you break God's word for the sake of your tradition? You honor me with your lips, but your hearts are missing the point."

So here's the challenge, church. How do we keep the traditions fresh without emptying them of their meaning? I did a quick google search of traditions that are no longer useful and found things like: Groundhog's Day, Daylight Savings Time, and someone even said "Dueling" (I mean, when's the last time we heard, "I challenge you to a duel!"). But then someone wrote: "Christianity" and it made me pause. After all, we call our faith a tradition, don't we? So what if this person has a point? What if we have broken God's word for the sake of our traditions? What if our worship hasn't always translated to healing and justice and forgiveness, but instead fostered the opposite? I mean, when we speak a prayer of confession—owning the ways we contribute to injustice individually and systemically—does it break our hearts open enough to translate into bold action? Or when we sing the Doxology—Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow—do we have a sense of heartfelt gratitude which fosters a gratitude for everything and everyone? Or is it something which has become lip service? You see, Jesus digs into the flesh to see where our hearts are and how it shapes us for being people who live the gospel in the world.

So what if? What if we mixed things up so that the center of church wasn't worship and our traditions? What if the center of the church was our mission and our worship and traditions revolved around that. There are some churches who start bakeries to feed people. They purchase a storefront and Monday through Saturday they feed people. Then on Sunday they worship in the store. Some buy a space and turn it into a day care for single parents. At the center of the church is its missional project they are doing together, and worship revolves around it. In Winston Salem there is a newer church called The Dwelling. You may have heard of it. It's a downtown church that was created for homeless people. They have mixed things up. Their worship revolves around their mission and the tradition can't help but translate into action.

So what if we dreamed about what we could do? In a divided world what are the traditions which bring us together? In an unjust world, what are the traditions which foster the fire of justice? In a world where violence and hate is the default, what traditions kindle peace and forgiveness? When we crack open the tradition, what do we find inside? Does it translate into loving our neighbor in practical ways?

So spend a few moments in prayer as we take up offering. Examine the heart of your favorite traditions. How does it shape you and us for living out the gospel in the world? How does it translate?