

BEYOND TRADITION
Mark 7:1-15
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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Whenever any time-honored tradition is being defended you inevitably hear the same argument, “But this is the way we’ve always done it. It’s tradition!”

On the other hand more progressive voices will counter, “Maybe so, but it’s time for a change, the old way isn’t working anymore!”

I, for one, find comfort and stability in tradition, but I also see the wisdom in rethinking and even replacing, our traditions, if the old way gets in the way of God’s will. Notice I didn’t say, “...if the old ways get in the way of progress.” The stakes are higher than that! Progress is only good if it’s within God’s will. History and your own experience tells you that too many times, for the sake of progress, we throw the baby out with the bath water.

We can sense tension building in Mark’s story of Jesus being questioned by the tradition keepers of his day. “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” (Mark 7:5)

Since their question was really a challenge Jesus accused them of being hypocrites.

“This people honors me with
their lips
...but their hearts are far
From me;
in vain they worship me
teaching human precepts
as doctrines.” (Mark 7:6-7)

It’s true isn’t it? Some folks carelessly stick to their traditions like glue because they fear change. They defend the status quo to protect their place on top of the pecking order while the change seekers work to smash the elites’ monopoly on power so something new can take its place. But again, just because something’s new doesn’t mean it’s right.

That’s why Jesus said, “I didn’t come to abolish the law...but to fulfill it.” (Matthew 5:17) Jesus wasn’t a zealous iconoclast, out to destroy sacred beliefs and practices, wiping the slate clean by purging the patriarchs and prophets from Jewish memory and then restarting from scratch. Jesus wasn’t anti-tradition, but he did oppose misinterpretations of the tradition that actually separated people from God and each other.

Make no mistake, Jesus had no quarrel with the Law of Moses which governed the life of Israel for two thousand years, but he had serious problems with religious rulers who twisted these laws to suit themselves.

Animal Farm, by George Orwell, is an allegory about leaders in authority who take the law into their own hands and twist it in their favor. Here's a summary of the plot:

Because the owner of their farm is incapacitated by alcoholism, led by the pigs, the animals revolt and drive the farmer out and change the name from Jones Farm to Animal Farm. They then set up a new society based on a philosophy called Animalism which was codified in "Seven Commandments."

- 1) Whatever walks on two legs is an enemy.
- 2) Whatever goes on four legs or has wings is a friend.
- 3) No animal shall wear clothes.
- 4) No animal shall sleep in a bed.
- 5) No animal shall drink alcohol.
- 6) No animal shall kill any other animal.
- 7) All Animals are Equal.

These commandments were given to keep the animals separate from human society. There was to be no collaboration between the two because the animals believed they'd be contaminated by human ways. With these commandments the animals established a just society until, after some time, the pigs in charge secretly conspired to revise the commandments giving them unique powers and privileges. Years passed and eventually the Seven Commandments were totally abolished, replaced with the single guiding principle: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others."

What happened in Animal Farm has been repeated ad nauseum throughout history. A small elite group emerges from any organized community or society and either rewrites or abolishes the old rules and replaces them with new rules that protect the elite group's power and privileges.

To be fair, the scribes and Pharisees never deleted any of the laws from their scriptures. Instead it was their intention to improve the law by rigorously reinforcing the Law with newer and tougher detailed rules and regulations that made sure the faithful Jew stayed faithful.

Originally, the Law of Moses gave ten commandments of what you could or couldn't do along with numerous codes in the Torah. The scribes and Pharisees thought that wasn't good enough. Even more extensive regulation was required, so they wrote down an additional 613 commandments to make sure the original Ten were clearly understood and followed to the letter. Of course, it should be no surprise these endless rules and regulations were more burdensome than helpful. Here's why: only the elites of Jewish society had the leisure time to keep these complicated codes, therefore disqualifying the working and poorer classes whose time was spent primarily on survival.

Because they didn't have the time or resources to keep the law to the Pharisees' satisfaction, the common folk were accused of being irreligious, and worse, downright sinners.

But not all the Pharisees walked in lock step. Some of them broke ranks and the unspoken question these wise and discerning Pharisees dared to ask openly was, "How can we, the guardians of the Law of Moses, minister to our own people if we constantly look down on them?"

The answer of course was they couldn't. Yes, there were plenty of Pharisees who recognized the conundrum, but apparently not enough. It took Jesus, an outsider, to challenge the religious establishment to open their eyes and see how they were becoming the problem and not the solution.

When you read all numerous stories in the Gospels about Jesus' run-ins with the Pharisees, you never hear Jesus question if the Pharisees lived within the Law, but whether or not they lived within God's will. Understand, the two aren't necessarily the same thing. Outwardly you can perform all the mandatory rituals, but that never guarantees you're inwardly right with God.

We all know about church members being seen and heard at Sunday worship but living off the rails the rest of the week. That's why Jesus wasn't impressed with what a Pharisee did in public but was more concerned with what he did in private. Because they wore blinders the Pharisees couldn't or wouldn't see that their brand of religion became a weapon to legitimize their mediocrity.

Case in point: ritual of hand washing. It wasn't done for hygienic reasons, only in the modern era did we make our children wash their hands before every meal. Instead, hand washing was a ritual to safeguard against contamination from the common, irreligious people the Pharisees had contact with during the course of the day. So every time a Pharisee performed the hand washing ceremony, he was demonstrating his desire to separate himself from people not like him, the very people he was called to serve and love.

There are two types of religion. One is based on legalism. A legalistic religion is all about the rigid practice of do's and don't, earning your salvation by being better than your neighbor. Not surprisingly, the legalist has a rigid image of God as the Divine Law Enforcer and the Score Keeper.

The other type of religion is relational. Relational religion is based on the friendship God has for the world. God comes down to us first, so we can be nurtured by his love and then be empowered to love God back. What's more you find yourself loving others and even yourself, maybe for the first time. You then realize if God loves and forgives you, you should do likewise and be ready to love and forgive others. You then learn if God accepts you just the way you are then maybe you should start accepting people different than you. Let's be clear, judging people solely on their race, class, creed

or sexual orientation isn't tolerated in the Kingdom of God, unless you're able to judge with the same mercy and kindness of Jesus.

This doesn't mean you give a pass to people who are dishonorable, dishonest, selfish or cruel or devaluing others to puff themselves up. These behaviors are also not tolerated in God's kingdom and the Christian is expected to be assertive, truthful and humble in confronting these abuses.

The great saints of history knew this to be true if only because they allowed God's love to convert their own attitudes and behaviors. As a result, they found themselves becoming Christ-like, not because they were good but because God is good and that makes all the difference.

Does all this mean the traditions and law codes in the Old Testament are now obsolete? Some of them are. We no longer practice ritual hand washing to clean off other people's kooties. We don't practice "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" to get even. Women today aren't subject to the authority of men and people with communicable diseases aren't banished from the community. If you're injured or sick on the Sabbath you can still go to the doctor.

Even so, at its best the Law of Moses empowered the Jews to live together in a just society that recognized its responsibility towards the poor, weak and helpless, an enlightened notion for its time and unique in the ancient world. Of course, today we find some of the laws in the Torah anywhere from being curious to oppressive to even barbaric. But stay focused on the bigger picture. For its time and place the Law of Moses provided thoughtful guidelines for being God's people and a good neighbor.

By the time Jesus finally came on the scene, the time was ripe for a dramatic change from the rigid legalistic religion to the relational practice of religion advocated by the prophets, but temporarily lost when the Pharisees took the Law into their own hands and complicated things.

What Jesus called the greatest commandment neatly summed up the Law of Moses with three guiding principles: Love God. Love your neighbor. Love yourself. Keep these three and you're not far from the Kingdom of God.

Jesus said, "I did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it." Once we grasp Jesus' meaning, maybe then we'll appreciate the reality of God's love for us even though our hands are dirty.