
TRUE WORSHIP

We all have certain traditions and beliefs that are important to us.

- They define our behaviors, how we think others should behave, and really what makes us who we are.
- This is what is behind this incident from Mark's gospel message today.

The Pharisees were looking for ways to criticize JESUS,

- And they want others to be upset with HIM as well.
- So, they point out that JESUS' disciples didn't follow the Jewish ritual of hand-washing before they ate.
 - For them, this was a sin.

Pharisees were not the only ones who got or get upset when traditions are not followed.

- Many of us get upset when others don't do things the way we think they should.
- The problem is that we don't like to give up our traditions or the way we've thought about how things should be done.

Recently, I read some comments from those who criticize the use of projection screens in church.

- "People aren't looking at the cross or each other," was a common complaint.
 - Instead, they would have people looking at hymnals or printed bulletins, also not looking at the cross or each other.
 - Screens lower costs spent on printing bulletins.
 - And singing is better when we are looking up.
 - Screens are very familiar to younger people who are used to classes and meetings in which screens are used.
 - For those who have some hearing loss, screens are very helpful.
- I didn't intend to open a debate about the use of screens but to show how some traditions might continue without consideration for the value of some changes.
 - The point is that we sometimes hold on to practices because we're familiar with them and frankly, we don't like change.

A woman at a church I had just started serving told me my job was to get the women to go back to dressing like ladies—no pants.

- Another church complained about teens wearing tennis shoes.
 - Rather than rejoicing in those who were attending these folks were trying to get people to conform to what they wanted.

While the Pharisees were among those most active in trying to stop JESUS, they weren't completely bad.

- They were committed to obeying and pleasing GOD, at least as they understood GOD's expectations.
 - And that led to an obsession with practices like kosher food, circumcision, and washing.
 - These practices helped them keep their identity as GOD's chosen people.
 - But obedience to these traditions had become more important than honoring GOD.

Jewish law was quite involved with many nuances to the rules.

- Yet it still left room for interpretation.
- So, the Pharisees created more rules clarifying how to keep the law.
 - Over time, these rules became laws in and of themselves, even being regarded as equal to Scripture.
 - The Pharisees lost sight of the difference between law and opinion.
- This is what JESUS challenged.
 - HE was not condemning all tradition.
 - HE was, however, concerned with those traditions that had been elevated to sacred status
 - and especially when it drew people's focus away from the worship of GOD.
- Even today, the Church must make a distinction between essential scriptural teaching and non-essential tradition.

So, when JESUS replied to the Pharisees, HE went to the heart of the issue.

- The Pharisees wanted tradition at all costs when they should have been more concerned with GOD's call to respond with love, compassion, and justice.
 - JESUS told them that GOD is more concerned with spiritual cleanliness.
 - We purify our hearts when we pray, worship, receive the sacraments, and seek to live according to what GOD wants.
 - When we show GOD's unconditional love and forgiveness to others, we are doing GOD's will, even if we don't know the exact rule for it.
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Tradition is important and even necessary at times.

- The difficulty occurs when it becomes a substitute for true worship and true faith.
- When certain practices become more important than why those practices were put in place, we have lost our focus.
- The Pharisees were more focused on strict observance of Jewish laws and rules than they were on true faith in GOD.
 - Their strict observance of rules had replaced their outward love and devotion.
 - They were more concerned with keeping GOD's people distinct and protecting them from assimilation into other cultures.
 - They had distinct rules that protected them from germs and pollution going into their bodies.
 - JESUS, though, said they should be more concerned with what comes out of their bodies.
 - You can wash your hands all you want, but that doesn't replace lying, cheating, gossiping, and so on.
 - The Pharisees were focused on the letter of the law;
 - JESUS emphasized the spirit of the law.
 - In doing so, JESUS calls us to beware of leaders who try to glorify themselves by what they say or do,
 - rather than those who seek to glorify GOD.
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What we eat and drink can't make us unclean.

- Only what comes out of us can do that.
- JESUS wants HIS disciples to understand that what matters most is what is in one's heart.
 - Going to church on Sunday, carrying your Bible, giving your offering, singing every hymn doesn't matter if your heart has not changed.
 - Doing these things on Sunday so that people see how good a Christian you are is false if doesn't alter how you live the rest of the week.
 - Listening and doing are different things.

That doesn't mean that we can't be hurt by what goes into our bodies.

- The choices we make can affect our lives.
 - But when GOD looks at us, the first thing GOD sees is what is in our hearts.
 - GOD doesn't care about how we look or dress.
 - GOD has greater compassion for the beggar in rags who has true faith than for those who wear fine clothes but have little love for GOD or others.
 - Whenever we renew our commitment to GOD and GOD's Kingdom, we truly receive GOD's blessings.
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JESUS claimed that these purity traditions were not needed because the Kingdom of GOD is for everyone.

- GOD's love is for all whether they keep the rules or not.
- All are equal before GOD.

More than that, JESUS was critical of those who believed that they could judge others.

- The Pharisees thought that because they kept the purity laws strictly, they could say who was and who wasn't deserving of GOD's love.
 - By the way, I really think that's GOD's call.
 - Their actions revealed a superficial and hateful attitude.
 - They were more concerned with what others thought about them than what GOD did,
 - so, their criticism became that which defiled them.
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JESUS wants us to be free to look at ourselves (not others) and see who we truly are as sinful, fallen individuals.

- Having done that, we are then free to accept the grace of GOD's mercy in JESUS' death and received especially here at HIS table.
- If we are focused on finding fault in others, we will miss our own need for GOD's help.
 - When our hearts belong to GOD, we won't need to focus on doing it the "right way."
 - All that matters is trying to do it GOD's way.

When we make faith about following rules and traditions, problems arise.

- The Pharisees made the Law more important than GOD's love and acceptance.
 - Many still do this today.
 - The Reformation was ignited by Martin Luther who wanted to help people break free from the traditions and rules of the Roman Catholic church of his day so that they could get back to the true worship of GOD.
- JESUS argued that not all the rules of the Pharisees had to be obeyed.
 - What mattered was loving GOD with our hearts, not our heads:
 - GOD's work. Our hands.

We have to ask ourselves, not what do we want, but what does GOD want?

- Do the ways we worship and live match with GOD's will?
 - If not, then we have lost our focus on the true worship of GOD.