

## Tradition verses Change

Mark 7:1-23

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First  
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### I

Have you ever wondered where so many of the traditions we take for granted come from?

For example, it is a tradition in western culture that when people meet,  
they shake hands.

In Asia, people bow,  
in the Middle East a kiss on both cheeks is proper,  
but in the west we shake hands.

Why do we do that?

Apparently the tradition started in the medieval period as a way of checking to see if the other person was armed with a dagger or sword.

Extending an empty hand was a gesture of friendship and meant you were safe in that person's presence.

The tradition of shaking hands continues,  
but its origins are mostly forgotten.

Or how about the tradition of the seventh inning stretch at baseball games?

According to one version, the tradition began on opening day in 1910 at a game between the Washington Senators and the Philadelphia Athletics.

President William Howard Taft attended the game, but in the middle of the seventh inning he grew tired of sitting (he weighed 350 pounds) and stood up to stretch, causing fans in the stadium to stand and stretch with him.

Another version traces the seventh inning stretch back to 1869 when Harry Wright, founder of the Cincinnati Red Stockings (the first professional baseball team), wrote in a letter:

*"The spectators all arise between halves of the seventh inning, extend their legs and arms and sometimes walk about. In so doing they enjoy the relief afforded by relaxation from a long posture upon hard benches."*

Is that why we still observe the seventh inning stretch today...  
or is it because baseball games are so darn long?

It is easy for a tradition to take on a life of its own.

As we see from the tradition of shaking hands  
and the tradition of the seventh inning stretch,  
we continue to do those things,  
though we rarely think about where they came from  
or what they are supposed to mean.

## II

The same is true when it comes to religion.

It is so easy for us to get all wrapped up in traditions and customs that we forget what their meanings are.

Here in this morning's reading from the Gospel of Mark,  
we find Jesus at odds with some of the traditions of his day.

The Jewish people knew that they were special to God,  
for God had said to them in the Old Testament that they were to be holy,  
just as God is holy.

Over the years the Jews developed a complex and comprehensive holiness code that regulated every area of life—

birth,  
death,  
sex,  
gender,  
health,  
economics,

jurisprudence,  
 social relations,  
 hygiene,  
 marriage,  
 behavior,  
 and ethnicity (because Gentiles were considered unclean).

New Testament scholar James Dunn notes that in the first century a disproportionate amount of rabbinic attention was devoted to just three things—  
 dietary rules,  
 Sabbath-keeping,  
 and circumcision.

This was in spite of the fact that rabbis would not have claimed these as the central aspects of God's will for humanity.

They knew that the essence of the law was the *shema*—

*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one...  
 and you shall love the Lord your God  
 with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.*

So why the relentless focus on dietary laws,  
 circumcision  
 and Sabbath-keeping?

The answer, Dunn says, involves "identity markers," or boundaries.

All groups of human beings have a tendency to be exclusive;  
 they want to know who is in and who is out.

So they adopt identity markers—  
 visible practices of dress,  
 vocabulary,  
 and behavior  
 that serve to distinguish who is inside the group  
 from who is outside.

In the Harry Potter books, for example, each of the four student "Houses" at the Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry has its own characteristics.

Slytherin valued ambition, cunning, and resourcefulness

Hufflepuff valued hard work, patience, loyalty, and fair play.

Ravenclaw valued intelligence, knowledge, and wit.

And Gryffindor, the House of Harry Potter, valued bravery, daring, and chivalry.

At the beginning of fall term the Sorting Hat sorted each new student into the House where she or he best fit with the dominant characteristics of that House.

Each House had its own coat of arms,  
 its own colors,  
 its own Quidditch team that competed with the other houses,  
 and its own traditions.

Such distinctions are found in every club and every school,  
 every fraternity and sorority,  
 and every religion.

This helps us understand why in first century Judaism so much attention was given to the purity codes.

As New Testament scholar Tom Wright says:

"The Temple cult, and the observance of Sabbaths, of food taboos, and of circumcision were the key things which marked out Jew from gentile, which maintained and reinforced exactly the agenda, both political and religious, of the hard-line Pharisees."

The role of the much-maligned Pharisees was to enforce the 613 *mizvot*, or commandments, of the Torah to remind the people of their duty to be holy in all aspects of their lives.

### III

One of these traditions involved the washing of hands before meals.

According to the Pharisees, this act had to be done in a particular way.

First, all the dust and sand had to be shaken off from the hands and arms.

Next, with the finger tips pointing upward, water would be poured, so that it washed down to at least the wrist.

Then the one hand would be cleaned by making a fist with the other hand and rubbing it against the palm of the open hand, and then the other hand would be cleaned in the same way.

This tradition even said how much water should be used—  
at least the amount of water that would fill one and a half egg shells.

So here in our passage from Mark, we find the Pharisees criticizing Jesus and his disciples for not following that tradition.

In their eyes, not to wash hands in that way was an insult to God.

But Jesus asks those Pharisees:

*Who is doing God's work? You or us?*

*You like to sit in your fancy houses and host parties for your friends.*

*We are out there with those who have no houses and with those whom you would not even invite to your parties.*

*You enjoy spending your time with the rich and the powerful.*

*We spend our time with the poor and the weak.*

*You love to wash your hands and talk about God's law.*

*We get our hands dirty, because we are out in the world, living God's law by caring for the needy.*

*So who is being faithful to God? You or us?*

Now to be fair, it should be said that the Pharisees have gotten some bad press.

Many of them were deeply devoted to their Jewish faith and committed to maintaining the viability of that faith in a hostile world.

But the problem was that they kept drifting away from God's Word and instead were following after the traditions.

Rather than just sticking with what the Scriptures said, they started coming up with their own ideas for how God's people should live.

#### IV

Every church, it would seem, has a few “Pharisees” who believe that their traditions and their ideas are the only right and true ways.

One church I served had a man named Ralph, who never said a single positive word to me in the six years I served that church.

His wife Myrtle was a delight—always called herself “Myrtle the turtle” (she was shaped like one too), but Ralph was something else.

One time I changed something in the order of service, and on the way out of the sanctuary Ralph said, “Boy, you sure messed things up this time.”

And on the Sunday when our daughter was being dedicated, with both of our families present and a guest minister there to lead the dedication service, I invited the congregation to stand and greet one other. We didn't call it the “passing of the peace,” but that's basically what it was.

I walked down the aisle greeting people, shaking hands, and then I got to Ralph and Myrtle. I shook Myrtle's hand then reached for Ralph's hand, and he said to me, “I don't know why you have this kind of crap in the worship service.”

Fortunately I've never encountered anyone quite like Ralph, but why is it that every church seems to have someone like him, the person who says:

If you change the color of the carpet in the sanctuary,  
I'll never set foot in church again.

Or: If you don't celebrate communion the way I like it,  
then I'm not going to come.

(I had a man like that in my last church; every time we had Communion by intinction [twice a year], Bob got up and walked out.)

Or: If we get a new hymnal,  
I'll drop out of the choir.

I read about a church that went through “the great hymnal controversy of 1975.”

For twenty years, the 1956 version of the hymnal had been used and cherished in that church, but then the music committee wanted to purchase the newly updated 1975 version.

This decision sparked a major debate on the quality of music in each hymnal.

The final decision was made at a two-hour, church-wide business meeting when a compromise barely avoided a split in the church

The 1956 hymnal would be kept in the sanctuary,  
and the 1975 hymnal would be used in the chapel.

Those are all examples of traditions that have gone bad.

Listen: God does not care what color the carpet is.

There is more than one right way to celebrate Holy Communion.

There is more than one good hymnal available for churches to use (and *Glory to God, the [new] Presbyterian Hymnal* is a very good one).

We all have our preferences—that is to be expected.

But when we allow those preferences,  
those traditions,  
to stand between us and God's Word,  
then something is terribly wrong.

Every church manages to elevate certain practices from the routine to the sacred.

Church growth specialist Bill Easum wrote a book about this phenomenon;

he called it "Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers."

For a church to grow, he says, it must find a way to grind that sacred cow into hamburger.

It is important to recognize that not all traditions are bad.

Some traditions are important.

Traditions can be valuable in communicating to us the truth about God and the truth about ourselves.

## V

Do you remember the opening scene in *Fiddler on the Roof*?

Tevye says:

*"Here in our little village of Anatevka, you might say that every one of us is a fiddler on the roof, trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his neck...How do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in a word—tradition!...Here in Anatevka we have traditions for everything—how to eat, how to sleep, how to work, how to wear clothes.*

*"For instance, we always keep our heads covered and always wear a little prayer shawl. This shows our constant devotion to God. You may ask, how did this tradition get started? I'll tell you—I don't know! But it's a tradition. Because of our traditions, every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do."*

When a tradition does that—  
tells us who we are and what God expects of us—  
it is a good tradition.

Traditions are meant to speak of the reality behind them.

But when traditions become sacred cows...

when we continue a tradition without remembering the reason for it...  
when the tradition gets in the way of serving the needs of people...  
then we have abandoned the commandment of God  
in order to cling to our tradition.

Toward the end of *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevya disowns his third daughter Chava after she runs off to marry a Christian.

Tevya would rather sacrifice his relationship with Chava than give up one of the traditions of his Jewish faith.

When we cling to our human traditions as though they were divinely revealed...  
then we lose sight of the very basic virtues of love, reconciliation,  
and the good news that God is among us as Savior.

When we sacrifice faith to save the tradition,  
even when everyone knows the tradition was established by human beings,  
not God...  
then we have lost our way.

Celebrate the tradition... **YES**,  
but always be open to the change that comes  
when we are in the flow of God's Spirit.

## VI

A young rabbi went to serve his first synagogue, and he noticed that on the first Sabbath, when he recited the prayers,  
the congregation on the left side of the synagogue stood at the beginning of the prayers,  
and the congregation on the right side remained seated.

The young rabbi thought this was a little odd, but continued to recite the prayers.

After the first few petitions, he noticed a murmuring, which intensified as he continued the prayers.

Finally, it got loud enough that he was able to make out some of the words that were being said.

The murmuring in the congregation was a disagreement between the two halves of the congregation.

The left half was saying that in this synagogue the tradition was that the congregation stood during the prayers.

And the right half was saying that in this congregation the tradition was that they sat during the prayers.

As the prayers continued, the voices got louder, until finally the rabbi stopped because he was sure that God was the only one who could hear him anymore.

The next Sabbath, it happened again.

The argument got so loud that the young rabbi stopped before he had finished his prayers—

people were actually yelling at each other,  
accusing the other side of heresy,  
calling each other names.

The young rabbi was so concerned that looked up the elderly rabbi who had served that congregation for many years, and told him what was going on.

After telling his story he asked the old rabbi:

"So is it the tradition of the congregation to stand during the prayers?"

The older rabbi stroked his beard and wisely replied,

"No, that has never been the tradition of that congregation."

"So is the tradition that they remain seated during the prayers?"

"No," said the older rabbi, "that was never the tradition of the congregation either."

The young rabbi threw up his hands in exasperation, and said,

"There must be some solution to this! The way things are now, they just end up screaming at each other during the prayers."

The old rabbi smiled a knowing smile and lifted an admonishing finger to the sky and said,

**"Yes! That was our tradition!"**

## VII

Friends, God is more concerned with who we are on the inside than the outward ceremonies we observe.

You can pray standing up  
 or you can pray sitting down  
 and still never really pray.

You can wash your hands a thousand times  
 and still have evil intentions in your heart.

You can sing every song in the 1956 hymnal  
 or the brand new hymnal  
 and still not know God.

You can worship on gold or red or vermillion carpet all your life  
 and never really experience holy ground.

You can sit in your pew to receive Holy Communion  
 or walk forward to receive Communion by intinction,  
 and still never commune with the Holy.

Jesus says, it is not the outward form of the tradition that matters—  
 it is what lies in our hearts that counts.

Yes...the church must honor its past  
 and claim the value of its traditions,  
 but still live in God's glorious now.

God wants to do a new thing today.

We need to be open to it.

What worked yesterday may not have power for tomorrow.

We live in a new day  
 with new challenges,  
 and we need to hear the word of the Lord for today.

In Philippians 3:13-14 the Apostle Paul wrote,

*"This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind  
 and straining forward to what lies ahead,*

*I press on toward the goal for the prize  
of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”*

Let us be open for God to do a new thing in our lives.

Let us be open for God to do a new thing in our church.

And let us never forget:

If the seven last words of the church are,

**“We’ve always done it this way before,”**

the seven first words of the church are:

**“We can do all things through Christ.”**

Amen.

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