

Proper 17B. Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23. August 30, 2015.

This week I saw the same joke applied to nearly every mainline denomination. It's an ecumenical joke, but we'll apply it only to ourselves. It's also an old joke, so maybe you've heard it, too, but I quite like it. It goes like this: "How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb?" And the answer is, "Change? But my grandmother donated that light bulb! You can't change the Mabel Worthington Chamberlain Memorial Light Bulb!" It's a good joke because it's not mean-spirited, it's a little bit funny, and it really does point to something true about us. Good ideas become habits, which become customs, become traditions, become untouchable.

Something similar is going on in this week's gospel lesson. Jesus, of course, is not really opposed to hand-washing. Sorry kids, this sermon won't be trying to get you out of having to wash your hands. Instead, Jesus is criticizing a situation where a tradition that is good in itself has become more important than the command of God. Episcopalians, take note! When Jesus talks about religious tradition, there's a very good chance that he's talking to us.

To help us hear what he might be saying to us, let's just think for a moment about how traditions work—how they come to be. Every tradition starts out as an innovation, usually designed to address some felt need. And if it addresses that need well—if it works—then we do it again, until it becomes a habit. And if works really well, then it may lessen the urgency of the need it originally addressed. And if at that point we continue doing it, then we might call it a custom. Eventually a new generation of leaders comes along and we teach our custom to them, but don't bother telling them all about the need it originally addressed, because that need is no longer urgent, or maybe not even apparent anymore. And at this point, once the origin of the practice is forgotten, it has become a self-sustaining tradition.

That doesn't make it bad or useless or outdated. Traditions become part of the fabric of who we are. They bind us together as a common people. They carry our common values, even when they are no longer "fixing" a problem. But among a people, like us, who value our traditions highly, things can sometimes get turned the wrong way, and then a tradition becomes dangerous. This is what happens in today's gospel story.

There are really two tradition problems going on in this passage, but the lectionary inexplicably cuts one of them out. The first, the one we have in our reading, is about purity and specifically involves ritual washing of hands, pots, cups, and kettles. This is a tradition that developed outside of the Mosaic law, and we can imagine how it got going. People wanted to be sure that they maintained ritual purity, which is a good desire to have if you're an observant first century Jew. So even though the law of Moses doesn't require you to wash everything, they decide that it couldn't hurt to do so, just to make sure. So the practice spreads, as a good way to go above and beyond, to be sure that you are maintaining the requirements of the law, and also as a good symbol of the purity that you value so highly.

But something has gone wrong with the basically good tradition of giving everything a good wash. The Pharisees are here using it to undermine the work that Jesus has been doing. He has just come, in chapter 6 of Mark, from feeding five thousand people, walking on water, and healing all the sick people in a town called Gennaseret. This is a high fulfilling of the law: feeding the hungry and healing the sick, helping those

in need. And the Pharisees are using a tradition about purity to try to show that this guy isn't so holy after all. Somehow things have gone backwards: a cherished tradition that is good, but not that essential, is being valued more highly than doing the most basic commands of God, which tend to pertain to caring for those in need. And Jesus' omission of this tradition is blinding the Pharisees to the miracle of God's work among them in Jesus.

The second piece of tradition trouble, which our reading omitted for some reason, makes this even more clear. There, Jesus lashes into the Pharisees for endorsing a practice where people deliberately get out of taking care of their aging parents by following a tradition of declaring that a certain portion of their money was dedicated to God—and thus they didn't have enough to care for their parents. That is a very clear case of a fine enough tradition (dedicating money to God) taking precedence over what God really wants from us, which is caring for those in need, especially when that means honoring our father and mother.

It reminds me of a situation my home church, Grace Place in Chicago had to deal with. Grace is a small church, with average Sunday attendance a little below St. Christopher's, and it meets in an unconventional, loft-like sanctuary space. We had a long-standing tradition of standing in a large circle for the entirety of the Eucharistic prayer. And then the priest and chalice bearers would go around the inside of the circle to distribute communion. It was a beautiful tradition that symbolized, for us, our intimacy and unity, the shared ministry of the clergy and laity, and the active engagement of the whole church in the Eucharist. But a problem developed: we started growing. So the circle got bigger. And bigger. And eventually, the circle had to have two rings, an inner and an outer ring. In other words, our symbol of inclusion and unity started leaving people on the outside. The good tradition had begun subverting its very purpose.

I'm dwelling on this tradition thing so much because I really think that this passage has something to tell us. It says to everyone, all the time, "keep your priorities straight. Don't let nice and helpful traditions distract you from loving God and thus helping those in need." But I think it says something else, too, to us here in this room this morning. Because we are facing some changes in the next few months and years. The week after Paris's retirement, the staff and vestry make a conscious decision to try to keep things "normal" in the first few weeks.

But there are going to be changes. We will have an interim rector. We will have a new formation director for children and youth. And eventually you will have a new rector. And these people will have other ideas, other passions, other articulations of their call. Even if very little of our common practice changes in the next few months, these folks will certainly ask questions about the traditions you have built for many years. They will help us ask the questions the transition process is designed to help us ask: what do we do? Why do we do it? What else do we feel called to do? How does this thing or that thing help us live and spread the good news of Jesus Christ?

Asking these questions is the work you are about right now, as the small group discussions begin this morning. As you go into those conversations, and as similar conversations continue in the coming weeks, take this text as an invitation to guard zealously those things that bring us closer to God and spur us on to help our neighbors. And for everything else . . . well, if we share those priorities, then I'm sure we'll make the right decision on the Mabel Worthington Chamberlain Memorial Light Bulb. Amen.