

Sermon Text for October 13, 2024

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“Tradition and the Word of God”

Matthew 15:1-9

Our world can feel like it is changing so fast, and at a pace we cannot endure. How do we respond? How do we live? How do we know how to be faithful in these new circumstances? When I was a child, we had access to four television channels and there was one TV in our house. My parents were not “early adopters” of technology, so others likely had more options. In contrast, my kids born in 2005 and- the same year as the iPhone- 2007- have generally had unending, complete access to the entire world every minute of their lives, if we had not monitored that access.

Our traditions often hold us. They define us. And guide us. Traditions- Christian traditions- like celebrating Easter and Christmas- help us to know who we are and to welcome others into this amazing story: Our heavenly Father gives Jesus to save our lives.

But, when the world, or more importantly, our town and our schools and what’s happening beyond us force us to face different circumstances, what traditions do we hold onto? Which aspects of our faith do we keep and which do we gratefully let go?

In today’s scripture passage, Jesus gives us a clear- if challenging- answer. **We keep God’s word. We let go of traditions we have added when it is clear we need to let them go.**

Prayer

Scripture reading

Matthew context

It is a gift to study the book of Matthew because we are able to see how he tells the whole story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Each week, we read and study one scene, figuring out how it contributes to the whole. My teens like to show me YouTube clips of their favorite movie scenes. It's often very slapstick humor or physical comedy and very funny. But, it ignores the storyline and meaning of the whole movie.

I want to take a minute and situate today's passage in Matthew's whole story of Jesus. In recent weeks, we've learned that Jesus was rejected in his hometown, suffered the murder of his cousin, John the Baptist, fed thousands of people with a few loaves of bread, revealed his power over the storm and called Simon to walk to him on the waves. He healed everyone who recognized him and touched the fringe of his cloak.

In this middle section of Matthew's Gospel, there is real tension about Jesus. Some people believe, and others do not. There is hardly consensus that Jesus is the Son of God, but the truth is beginning to break-through to many people. Jesus, seeing and knowing this, continues to clarify who he is and what it means that he is Son of God. Here, Jesus clarifies that, with God, our love, our discipleship and the use of our resources, are braided together like a rope.

Mt 15 begins with The Pharisees and scribes. They are people very concerned with keeping the Law. They come asking Jesus why his disciples break the "tradition of the elders". The Pharisees were so concerned with helping the Hebrews obey God's law that they devised set of additional rules and interpretations which extended what people had to do. The "tradition of the elders" or the set of extra laws, was intended to ensure that people did not get too close to breaking God's law.

We might compare the elders' tradition to fences in stunning but dangerous locations, like national parks. We build fences so people do not get close to the edge of a cliff. The view is still amazing, but the likelihood of accidents drops. The tradition of the elders provided a similar fence of rules and practices that protected God's people from accidentally breaking God's laws.

The Pharisees come to Jesus to ask why his disciples do not keep a law in this additional, and oral, tradition. Their tradition of washing hands before eating is based on a law which required the priests serving in the Temple to wash their hands before serving in worship. It is found in Leviticus, and it is meant to preserve the ritual cleanliness of the Holy of Holies, where God dwells. The law is not concerned with the prevention of disease and germs.

The Pharisees, concerned with the holiness of all Israel, extended God's law and called people to wash their hands at home before eating a meal. And apparently, Jesus and his disciples had no need to make themselves ritually clean. – And so you know, they were not spreading diseases!

Jesus answers their *WHY* question with a *WHY* question of his own. In essence, he tells these religious people, it is time to stop **your** traditions because they cancel out **my** word. (Image on screen) The Word they have cancelled is the 4th commandment. Jesus explains how they cancel it in verse 5.

The fourth commandment is, Honor your mother and father. Lev 20 is particularly attentive to the parent child relationship. Israel is to be a nation in which parents do not dispose or sacrifice children and which children love, respect and honor their parents. It is not to be like the surrounding nations, in which parents and children fight and harm each other. And this makes sense: God wants families to grow and thrive. And, for people as his image on earth, to fill the earth.

On the other hand, the tradition of the elders, permitted people to make an oath to give an offering to the Temple. Once the oath was made, that money was earmarked, unavailable for other uses. The oath could not be taken back- even, if it was made rashly, in short temper. The oath meant the money could not be used to take care of their aging parents. This oath is called Qorban.

It is worth pausing to remember what it would have been like to become an **elder** (irony!) in Matthew's time. There were no retirement plans to invest money for later. No 401Ks to sock away bits and pieces for then. No Social security payments to calculate. Only a lifetime of parenting and training your children in the ways of God.

So, the Pharisees allowed the practice of Qorban, preventing adult children from using their resources to love and honor their aging parents in concrete ways.

In times when the pressures on us are changing, Jesus' guide to the Pharisees guides us: we keep the commandment of God. We let go of the traditions which prevent us from caring for those who need it.

What traditions have we established and cherished? I asked a few of you what your favorite Strasburg Pres traditions are... decorating for Christmas, the celebration of milestone years of membership... wonderful things that make being a part of this faith community joyful and point us to worship God. We call our first worship service, Classic, rather than traditional, because it signals to passersby that it is not our traditions which gather us, but the Word of God.

Paul provides us an example of the kind of theology needed for letting go of traditions which prevent us from obeying the Word. Paul had to wrestle with some very important traditions, as the apostle to the gentiles. How would the church understand circumcision, for

instance? Would they continue to observe the food laws which separated Jews from gentiles? The food laws were particularly critical as they sometimes interrupted table fellowship- that is, Communion- between Jewish and gentile Christians. To bring this full circle, the food laws and circumcision had the power to “undo” the repair Jesus makes between people, if the church had insisted they be kept.

In our Colossians passage, Paul warns against the dangers of being deceived by human ideas. He warns against following our own practices and ways. He tells them to Watch out! We can take Paul’s warning by allowing our traditions to be examined and held up to Jesus’ standard. Rather than being deceived, Paul urges, walk according to Christ, according to the Word of God.

Paul calls it deceit. In Matthew 15:7-9, Jesus draws attention to the image of both lips and heart. Jesus calls the practices of the Pharisees and scribes hypocritical. They say they value the word of God, but their hearts are with their money and reputation (appearing pious).

Jesus calls the Pharisees hypocritical because they want to appear faithful to God and fail to do that because they do not use their money to care for God’s people: mothers and fathers. We are called to use our money to ‘honor our parents’ when they need it. I’d dare say that the church has always had a tradition of considering all elder statespeople to be our mothers and fathers. Biology does not determine who receives care.

Some of us are like the Pharisees, some like mothers and fathers.

There is another factor in hypocrisy: God is not satisfied with designated gifts coming later where there are people who need care and support today. The idea that our offerings are better given today than later may feel challenging or like permission- or completely

irrelevant. But for any of us focused on investments, we might be tempted to think that if I wait another ten years to give what I have designated, it will be twice as big: God does not seem to care about the size of the gift, when there are people who need care today.

And so, Jesus completely upholds the command to honor our mothers and fathers. Let's not allow any traditions to get in the way of doing so.