

St. John Lutheran Church
The Sermon

August 29, 2021

Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

It doesn't seem such a bad idea, does it. Washing your hands before you eat. How many of us wash our hands before dinner? How about washing your apples and grapes when you bring them home from the grocery store? How many of us wash our cups and pots after supper? Doesn't seem like such a bad tradition, this concern that the Pharisees raise about washing hands.

The Gospel lesson for today has been interpreted sometimes as if to say, "Look at those poor benighted Jewish people. They think they have to earn their way to God by following their old, outdated traditions, whereas we Christians are enlightened. We don't have to earn our way to God. Instead, God has come to us in Jesus Christ. So we live out our relationship with God by following Jesus. Isn't it sad for them and great for us!

I don't think a Jewish person would say it that way. I think a Jewish person would say, "God has come to us, too. God came to us and gave us the Law, the Torah, the Instruction, the Gift. So we live out our relationship with God by following the Law, the Torah, the Instruction, the Gift.

Jesus did not have a particular problem with tradition. In fact Jesus followed tradition. He was a good Jew, as were his disciples, all of them.

Jesus changed tradition when it got in the way of human healing and wholeness and connection and community. That's when he would change it.

That's when we change it too. Like anything that is alive, tradition is not a fossil. It is not a fly caught in amber, frozen and doomed to remain the same forever. Tradition evolves. It remains true to itself, and it also changes.

Now, we have some traditions in the Christian community. Some good traditions have not changed that much. For example, we sing “Silent Night” on Christmas Eve. Don’t worry, we will continue to sing “Silent Night” on Christmas Eve here at St. John. But woe betide the poor foolish pastor who might suggest at some point somewhere that they not sing “Silent Night” on Christmas Eve. No, no. It’s tradition.

On the other hand, we have some traditions that have changed. Marriage, for example. Marriage is a wonderful thing. It involves fidelity and honor and honesty and forgiveness and challenge and love for our whole lives. But it has changed.

There was once a time not that long ago, that if you were a woman and you got married, then all your money went to your husband. If you owned a house, your house was now his. If you owned land, your husband could sell your land. That has changed. Marriage is different now.

Birth control has changed marriage. Time was, if you got married and made love, you would most likely end up with children sooner or later. Sometimes you did not, and that caused deep grief both then and now. But marriage almost always meant children.

Now, you choose whether to have children. You choose how many, and when. Marriage has changed.

More recently, even if you loved someone who was of the same sex as you, you could not marry them. That has changed in our society and in some of our churches, including St. John. Gay and lesbian persons can get married now. We changed marriage because the way we were doing it before shut people out.

Now, we still have fidelity and honor and honesty and forgiveness and challenge and love for our whole lives. It just includes gay people as well as straight.

Another tradition that has changed. In the Lutheran Church, we emphasize faith: that we are saved by grace as a gift through faith, that is, through a relationship of trust with Jesus Christ.

That emphasis is a great tradition, a true tradition. But sometimes, in our emphasis on faith, we have forgotten love. We have focused on ourselves and our own relationships with God and forgotten God’s love for people who are poor or oppressed or grieving.

Indeed, we have sometimes been afraid to talk too much about helping others, because heaven forbid that we give the impression that we think we are doing good things. Let us not talk too much or do too much to help others lest, heaven forbid, we give the impression we think we are earning our way into heaven.

This has led to a habit called quietism, where we do nothing. And quietism shuts people out. Quietism gets in the way. So quietism is a habit, a tradition that is changing.

We aren't earning our way into heaven. We are seeking to point out heaven on earth. We need that right now, don't we. We hear the hateful rhetoric blasted back and forth in our country nowadays. We are sick unto death of the coronavirus. We watch the pullout from Afghanistan, all those people desperate to get out. We grieve and rage over the terrorist attacks.

How do we show heaven? How do we live the love of God in times like these?

Little things. Watch for the refugees. They are coming. Can we help a refugee? Can we be the love of God for them? Pray for the soldiers and care for the soldiers. They are coming. Can we love?

Here is what we are saying. Goodness is stronger than evil. Love is stronger than hate. Light is stronger than darkness. Life is stronger than death. Jesus is alive. Jesus is alive. That's what we are saying.

When we work for justice, when we serve people in need, we are not trying to save the world. We are not trying to earn our way to heaven. We are witnessing to the heaven that has come to us, to love of Jesus and the beauty of God that has enchanted our souls. We are trying to be a part of that Holy Spirit life which is always from forever, and is always being made new. Thanks be to God.