



“Tradition”

Scripture – Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson

Sunday, September 2, 2018

When I was growing up, the Webster Groves High School choir would close every winter concert with the “Hallelujah Chorus.” At the end of the program, the director invited choir alumni to the stage and passed out extra scores so they could join in singing. And as the familiar opening bars rang out the audience would rise to its feet.

It was a beloved tradition. Community members would come out to hear Handel’s famous chorus, even if they didn’t have high schoolers at home. College students would finagle their schedules to be home in time to join their former choir on stage. And kids like me — who grew up watching older siblings and family friends move through the music program — could not wait for our turn to sing.

But my junior year of high school, we hired a new choir director. He wanted to take the program in a different direction, which involved cutting the winter concert ... and — with it — the “Hallelujah Chorus.”

As you might expect, there was an uproar — from students, from alumni, from community members who felt they were losing a piece of their Christmas celebration.

Now, this was not really about the Hallelujah Chorus. If you look hard enough, you can find plenty of places to sing or hear this music during the holidays.

For my hometown, this was about tradition ... This was about the ritual of singing a particular song at a particular time of year. This was about a practice that connected generations of graduates to the community that had formed them. This was about the way we’d always done things ... about the *right* way of doing things.

Tradition is a powerful thing. It grounds us. It shapes us. It gives us practices that bind us together in communities large and small. It teaches us the “right” way of doing things.

This was true for our spiritual ancestors as well.

According to the religious establishment in first century Palestine, the “right way” to practice faith involved washing. Washing hands. Washing food. Washing pots and pans. Purity was central to religious observance — not because the scribes and pharisees were obsessed with hygiene, but because cleanliness was part of a being the “holy nation” that God commanded the people of Israel to be. Just like the priests — who washed their hands before entering the temple — every member of this community washed up before sitting down to eat. It was a

way of setting mealtime apart as sacred. (As a people who have a table at the center of our common life, this is something we can understand.)

The ritual of washing hands before eating is *not* inherently problematic. (And for modern readers with an understanding of germs, it just seems like common sense!) But — in this passage from Mark — the practice becomes the object of scrutiny. And rightly so, for it is no longer serving the purpose for which it was intended.

When the religious leaders encounter Jesus, they immediately point out his disciples' impiety. Unlike the scribes and pharisees — who, no doubt, faithfully wash their hands before meals (just like their parents and grandparents and great-grandparents before them) — the followers of Jesus are eating with unclean hands. They have done away with a practice that has endured for centuries, a practice intended to keep this community holy.

“Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?,” the pharisees ask. “Why do your disciples not live according to the *tradition*?”

There it is — the issue at hand. This upstart preacher and his motley crew of disciples are not following the *tradition* of the elders. The time-honored ritual of washing hands before meals has been forgotten or downgraded or discarded as Jesus and the twelve give their time and energy to other pursuits ... Little things — like healing the sick, like feeding a multitude.

The religious leaders — who are always looking to discredit Jesus — focus only on his apparent missteps. Like political opponents looking to mount a smear campaign, the pharisees zero in on what his disciples have done wrong. I can see it now, plastered across a billboard in Galilee: “Jesus of Nazareth: The *anti*-tradition candidate.”

But Jesus counters (as he is prone to do), and turns their critique into a teaching moment: He chastises the scribes and pharisees for privileging human tradition over the teachings of God, and declares: It is not what goes *in* to a person, but what comes *out* — from the human heart — that defiles.” Murder, adultery, theft, deceit ... He recites a list of vices that echo the commandments God gave the people Israel so that this community might live as a holy nation: Thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not commit adultery; thou shalt not steal; thou shalt not bear false witness ...

This is the way to practice faith: Obeying the law God gave so that we might live in right relationship with both Creator and creation. Loving God with heart, soul, and mind, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. Demonstrating our righteousness by the words and deeds that flow from our hearts, not by half-hearted adherence to empty rituals.

But the scribes and pharisees have lost sight of God's law, focusing instead on traditions that — too often — function to police and to separate. Instead of helping them live as the holy nation God envisioned, the practice of washing before meals has become a litmus test — a way of determining who is clean and who is defiled, who is in and who is out.

This — of course — is a by-product of tradition. The shadow-side of having rituals that bind people together is that they also function to differentiate between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Between our family and their family. Our community and their community. Our nation and their nation.

The scribes and pharisees try to use the tradition of the elders in this way; by pointing out the disciples' defiled hands, these leaders are reducing the practice of washing to a boundary marker that separates those who belong from those who don't.

But Jesus won't let their behavior slide. "You hypocrites!" he chides. "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition!" ... You have become so easily distracted — focusing on clean hands rather than pure hearts, on judging the community rather than serving the community. You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.

It's easy to join Jesus in rebuking the scribes and pharisees. But we are not immune to this pitfall. Rituals change. Traditions evolve. But remaining faithful to God's law of love is an age-old challenge.

I recently re-watched the film *Chocolat*.¹ You might remember this story of a woman named Vianne, who wanders into a tranquil French village in 1959 and shocks the townspeople by opening a chocolate shop during Lent.

This little village in the French countryside is stubbornly rooted in tradition. The residents have a rigid understanding of right and wrong, or — rather — of how they *are* and *are not* supposed to act. Every week the pews in the village church are full; all the townsfolk know where they should be on a Sunday morning, though some are sleeping through the sermon or pocketing trinkets from a neighbor's purse. And as they enter the holy season of Lent, they practice penance and self-denial — at least publicly.

But — for all their piety — this village has forgotten how to offer grace, to practice compassion, to extend welcome. They have forgotten the holy law they claim to uphold.

Until the north wind blows in a restless soul, and breathes new life into this stuffy little town.

Vianne and her daughter aren't much for social convention: Vianne was never married to Anouk's father, which she makes no effort to hide despite the gossip that ensues in 1950s France. She dresses in bold colors and off-the-shoulder tops, and does not wear black shoes "like the other mothers." She refuses to go to church.

And then there are the things that really offend traditionalist sensibilities: Vianne takes in a woman fleeing an abusive marriage. She welcomes the "River Rats" whom the rest of the town shuns as soon as they dock at the riverbank. And — of course — there is the issue of the chocolate shop; with her warm hospitality and decadent treats, Vianne shamelessly tempts the villagers to break the Lenten fast.

Some view Vianne's blatant disregard for tradition with curiosity, others with disapproval. But the town's mayor, Count Reynaud, sees Vianne — and everything she represents — as a threat.

Count Reynaud is something of a 1950s Pharisee. He flaunts his piety, making a show of denying himself even basic sustenance during the season of Lent. And he expects the citizenry to follow suit. So he mounts a smear campaign, bad-mouthing Vianne and her chocolates all over town, until the villagers are too nervous to set foot in her shop. And Vianne is not his only target. When the group of drifters show up in town, the mayor leads the charge to "boycott immorality," — as he calls it — so these unwelcome guests docked at their riverbank will get the hint and move on. With every whispered remark, he makes it clear who does — and does not — belong in this community.

Count Reynaud is on a crusade to preserve tradition and protect his village from anything that might corrupt or defile. But — just like the leaders of Jesus' day — he has become so fixated on religious ritual and social custom that he has lost sight of God's law. In his quest for holiness, he has forgotten how to love God with heart, soul, and mind, and to love his neighbors as himself.

¹ *Chocolat*, Miramax Films (2000)

So it is Vianne who most embodies the Gospel of Jesus Christ. She is the one who practices hospitality and welcomes those others have cast aside. She models generosity and treats neighbors with kindness. And — through her example and her care — families are reconciled, outsiders are included, and the community comes alive. The wind that blew Vianne into this tranquil French town — some might call it the Holy Spirit — inspires the whole community to become more loving, more joyful, more faithful to the commandments of God.

It's true that traditions around piety and ritual do not have the same hold on us that they did on our ancestors or on this fictional village in the French countryside. And it's rare we encounter pharisees or pharisaic mayors bent on protecting their communities from things that defile.

But it is still easy for us to lose sight of God's law of love. It can be easy for us to forget the commandments that help us live in right relationship, especially as our communities become more fractured and we become more convinced that our way is the right way. It can be easy for us to fixate on customs that separate and practices that divide, and neglect to love God with heart, soul, and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves.

But the Holy Spirit blows in ... freeing us to let go of empty rituals and stale traditions, and to embrace rituals that are life giving and traditions that further God's kingdom. The Spirit blows in, inspiring us to practice generosity, to offer compassion, to extend welcome. The Spirit blows in, giving us the grace we need to seek after God's ways, to remain faithful to God's law of love.

Thanks be to God.

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Eternal God –

In the beginning you looked upon chaos and saw what could be. You saw light that could pierce darkness, and land that could yield fruit. You saw a home for us, and you spoke that home into being. With your Word, you formed life from the dust of the earth. And when the work was finished, you looked upon creation and declared it 'good.' You called us to a life as beautiful as everything you had made ... But we turned away from you.

Always faithful, you did not give up on your people. You gave us your law – teaching us to love you with heart, soul, and mind, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. When we neglected to do justice and love kindness, you called to us through the voices of prophets and beckoned us back to you. In the fullness of time, you sent your Son to show us the way ...

Jesus brought good news to the poor and proclaimed release to the captives; he healed the sick and strengthened the fainthearted. A friend of sinners, an advocate for the lowly, Jesus showed us how to love you and one another. Faithful to your mission, he went to the cross, died, and rose again, that we might have life and have it abundantly.

Through Christ we have a place prepared for us at this table, where you receive us with open arms. So we come with a hunger that bread alone cannot fill. As we gather around this table, send your Holy Spirit upon us and upon these gifts of bread and cup, that this meal may unite us with Christ and with all who share this feast.

Holy God,

- We cannot share this bread, and forget those who are hungry ...
- We cannot gather around the family table, and forget the divisions that plague us ...
- We cannot glimpse your kingdom, and forget the brokenness of our world ...

We lift before you those weighed down by injustice, those suffering from violence, those who struggle with illness or who mourn the loss of loved ones. Be present in the midst of suffering, O God, that all for whom we pray may know peace, and comfort, and security.

As we come to this table, we pray that you would strengthen us for your work. Help us, O God, to cling to your living word — and to root ourselves in it — that we may be a people who are bold to follow Christ. Give us hearts that overflow with compassion, and hands offered freely in service, so that we might participate in your work until all creation experiences your wholeness.

We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, the one who gave us words to pray: **Our Father ...**