

## Wesley United Methodist Church

August 30, 2015

"Traditions and Ceremonies..."

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

A teacher observed a boy entering her classroom with dirty hands. She stopped him and said, "Johnny, please wash your hands. My goodness, what would you say if I came into the room with hands like that?" With a smile, the boy replied, "I think I'd be too polite to mention it."

A pastor says his son's Sunday School teacher approached him after church and said, "Let me tell you what your son said in Sunday School today (a phrase sure to strike fear in the heart of every pastor). She had been teaching about how God created Adam from the dust of the earth.

To which his son, Luke, said, "You mean I'm made out of dirt?" The teacher responded, "Well, in a sense, yes." Luke thought for a moment, processing this information through his four-year-old brain. Then he said, "My Mom is NOT going to be happy about that!"

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem saw some of Jesus' disciples eating food with unwashed hands. The Pharisees and all the Jews, says Mark, do not eat unless they give their hands ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. They are very careful. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers, and kettles. So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?" Jesus did not respond well to their criticism. He said to them, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written, 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men." Isaiah 29:13

This was a matter of hygiene. And, it was not even about keeping traditions. Traditions and ceremonies are important. They remind us of our responsibilities. However, it bothered Jesus that the Pharisees could be such sticklers for their traditions and their ceremonies, but so blind to their responsibilities to other people. What was the great commandment? Certainly it was to love God, and traditions and ceremonies help us express our love for God. But what is the second commandment? To love your neighbor as yourself. Here the Pharisees fell woefully short.

Please do not misunderstand. They were not alone. It's just that Jesus expected more out of them. They were God's elect. Pharisee means set apart. And yet when it came to how they treated others, they were just like everyone else. They were more interested in their own agenda than they were in God's agenda, which is redeeming the least and the last. Wonder what that means to us.

First of all, we need to see that it is good to keep traditions and ceremonies. We see no reason in scripture to doubt that Jesus kept the traditions of his people. We know that he was in the temple on the Sabbath. We know that he was a student of the Hebrew Bible, he referred to it constantly. He set aside time to pray on a regular basis. Traditions and ceremonies are good.

Traditions and ceremonies help us define and hold on to what is important in our lives. People who provide a healthy foundation for our society are those who respect tradition.

Jesus was not opposed to rituals, ceremonies and traditions. However, he didn't want us to substitute rituals for authentic religion or ceremonies for compassion toward others. Traditions serve to bind people together and make for a more cohesive group. Of course, they can also be silly and inconsequential. Like not wearing white shoes after Labor Day. In my home town it wasn't until late October that you didn't wear white shoes and then not before Easter.

Others can be sinful. Like washing your hands to demonstrate to others your piety, when really your heart is far from God. Jesus quoted Isaiah the prophet, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men' (Isaiah 29:13). You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."

Traditions are good; they are no substitute, however, for a vital commitment to God and to your neighbor. All of us have rituals we perform. Some of us are slaves to these rituals. Occasionally I teach at the Colorado State Patrol Academy and I have a room on the same floor with the cadets. My first time there I was warned that the Drill Sergeant will kick my door at 0500 hours and he expects me to be in full uniform standing at attention. I played right along with it and was ready should he kick my door. He did, I stepped out in the hall and I stood at attention. The joke was on him when he noticed that I wasn't one of his cadets. I slept a bit longer the next three days...

The meaning of life is not what rank in life we achieve, or how observant we are of the high and holy days of our faith. Or how well we keep traditions and ceremonies. The meaning of life is to live in such a way that your life brings glory to God, and the world is a better place because you've been here. The goal of life is to make sure you have a clean heart as well as clean hands.