

## “Intentional Tradition”

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Deuteronomy 4.1-2, 6-9

Mark 7.1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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This past week I was in Indiana with the Wabash Pastoral Leadership Program Cohort. I mentioned last week that we spend every other month discussing various topics and how they relate to spirituality and faith communities. This month’s topic was immigration and the economy.

The cohort is mostly made up of pastors from Indiana but much of the information we receive translates to any mainline Protestant church in the country. Churches are facing similar dilemmas, especially when it comes to finances and the economy during pandemic. Communities are having the same difficult conversations about diversity and ways the church can be prophets in the world where there is resistance. The tension and stress are not unique and this is all, unfortunately, a collective experience.

Our leadership in the group talked about change. The world is always changing, and the churches change, too. The church – and by this I mean the Christian church across the country, not specifically this church – is at a point of having to change. I believe most churches are aware of this necessity for change. It has been around for a while. Yet, I think the decline of membership and the struggle many churches have in budgets are the tangible and visual cues for a change that has actually been necessary for some time. Just because many churches can remember when pews were packed and money flowed in doesn’t mean the church wasn’t in need of a transformation, it means we didn’t see it then.

Change is difficult, especially for institutions. Rev. Libby Manning, our cohort leader who is also a minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, reminds us every time we gather that change is difficult for everyone. She tells us that when making changes humanity can only expect a 1-2% change. This small percentage is often how much our minds can handle before being overwhelmed. I would guess many of us changed more than 1-2% in the past year because of the pandemic. Though, I also think long term, that small change can make even the biggest difference.

Take for example this pen. Let’s pretend that our progress in the world is the trajectory of this pen. If I moved my pen just the smallest bit to the left, that looks like a small change. Though, in twenty to thirty years, if we pretend the trajectory is out here, what looked like a matter of centimeters now looks like a matter of feet. In times of transformation, even when we are the ones to initiate change, we can often hang on to patterns of security or tradition so that we have something stable to cling to when we feel uncertain. I know that my family really cherished routine each day during pandemic. Some of the routine had changed, but we still woke up, dressed, and started our day the same, creating a new pattern.

Our Gospel reading today talks about tradition. The disciples are eating with their hands, which is a difference from what was typical in that community. It might seem like a small change, but it is surely noticed. Others call out the disciples about this, and we might wonder if this is more than just tradition, but also about being sanitary. In these times we're more aware than ever of not eating with our hands, especially without washing them. I would say, though, that those who are calling them out are more concerned with the break of tradition, because that is what the author focuses on. If the people were concerned with clean hands they might have offered them a wet rag, not instead shame them for doing things in a way they perceive as "wrong."

Jesus asks the crowd to question what tradition is to them, and wonders aloud, in typical Jesus fashion, what might be more important to them – human interactions and relationships, or rules and tradition? Jesus states: "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." It wasn't that Jesus saw the tradition as bad, but that the people cared more about the tradition than the human beings at the table. I believe it is always beneficial for us to question tradition, question our faith, and ask ourselves why we do what we do – because what we practice is often what we truly believe.

In another church I once knew in a different denomination there was conversation at one point about moving the church service so that another minister could work at two churches and arrive a bit later at this church service. There was an argument that the church service had to end at 11 because of tradition. Not ever seeing the scripture passage that required churches to end at 11, I questioned this – what was part of that tradition? Why 11? Eventually I found out there once was a lunch bell located across the street from the church that went off at noon. If the service began at 11, and went until noon, that lunch bell would have been overpowering of the worship service. That tradition had history and meaning – until that lunch bell had moved across town nearly a decade before – and the reasoning for the tradition stayed but no longer made sense.

Another larger example of this is of the Choluteca bridge in Honduras. In the 90s this bridge was created to go over the Choluteca River. This was meant to be the premier bridge – fantastic technology and it was the best of the best. It truly was a lovely bridge – well, it is – it still exists, because the technology proved true. Tropical storms and other natural disasters came through and the bridge remained. The river, however, did not. Or, it did, but it found another channel and shifted so that the river flowed, but no longer under the bridge. The roads were swept away, the water moved, and this bridge just sits in the middle of nowhere now.

Too often we find ourselves like the people in this passage – we want to create a legacy – something that lasts. This is humanity – wanting to make a difference and create something that will last forever. Yet, God reminds us that nothing lasts forever. We are dust to dust and ashes to ashes. We can create the biggest, strongest, most beautiful statues in the world, but it will mean nothing if people are food insecure or without homes. The legacies are not in the buildings or the rules but in how we treat one another along the way. Doing this means we have to be flexible with our structures so that it can meet the ever changing needs of the world.

Sometimes when our world changes we miss how to shift with it. As a minister and writer I love the history of the printed word. A few years ago I visited a printing press in Ohio. In the 1800s this printing press would print four billion subscriptions a day. If you've ever seen one of the original printing machines, you know that each word was created with individual letter stamps. The stamps were put in upside down and backwards and then fed into the machine. Editing was happening as the letters would be placed and there was thought put into every word.

Now, in the amount of time it took me to tell you about this, four billion articles were probably posted online. Our words do not always have the same thought and energy put into them. I love that words can be transmitted so much faster now than ever but I wish we put the same intentionality into our words as publishers in the 1800s.

Jesus might agree, as this was an issue in his time, too. Scripture doesn't hold back from the snark and harsh words that were said in that time. These people have been tearing apart the disciples for not washing their hands. Jesus clarifies and tells them it is not what goes into their mouths that matters but what comes out of their bodies. It is not what they consume, it is what they produce out in the world. It isn't the dirty fingers touching food that is a concern, but the sharp words and hatred that leave a lasting mark.

In this world where hate-filled words are everywhere we come to worship to re-center. We come to hear the grace-filled words. To hear that the work you do in the world – the difficult work – is good work and that you are loved. We come to hear the words of God and to know that God loves us.

In Deuteronomy God talks about how God is invested in God's people. We are to reflect the goodness and just mercy of God in the world. When we reflect God's love and God's words, we are an example of God in the world. We gather to remember, because we are more than just who we are in this very moment. We gather to remember how we are connected to our faith ancestors. We are connected to those in the room. We are connected to those who will go after us.

This past week I met Robert Rueda, who is the Director of Baptist Student Ministry at the University of Texas in the Rio Grande Valley. One of the beautiful ways he approaches his work is that when he looks at someone, he sees the future. He imagines their grandchildren and family to come, and sees the ways our actions now shape the future.

How do we see the future? How are our words and actions shaping what is to come? Think back to that pen trajectory. Where would you like to see that shift? It only takes a small shift now. When we see individuals and imagine future generations, we are able to also see how God is at work in the world. When we do this, we remember the words of Deuteronomy and "take care and watch ourselves closely, so as...make them known to your children and your children's children." Thanks be to God. Amen.