

2 →
Jimmy
Ben
Matty

ROOTS AND WINGS: THE PLACE OF TRADITION IN OUR LIVES

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

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 3, 2000.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I love tradition. Kay and I chose the traditional wedding vows when we got married. We love the tradition of our annual New Year's Day Pork and Sauerkraut dinner with family members. It was our tradition to pray with our children before bed time and before meals. I have come to appreciate the tradition of standing for the national anthem before a football game. I rarely miss the traditional Memorial Day ceremonies. Voting at election time is a valuable, democratic tradition. Tradition strengthens marriages, families, communities and churches. Traditions remind us who we are.

Sometimes I fear we're losing valuable traditions and run the danger of spiritual amnesia.

~~Presbyterians have very few traditions that distinguish us as Christians = biblical illiteracy is~~
rampant. Statistics show that a minority of Presbyterian families say grace before meals or have a daily time of prayer and reading Scripture. In many church circles 'tradition' is almost always used in a negative sense. It's used to describe old, dead ways that stifle growth. It describes the lifeless past that has no potential and from which our modern world has escaped. And Jesus seems to lend his voice to those who want to get rid of tradition. He tells the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." What goes here? Does Jesus condemn tradition? Does he want us to forget the past? Let's take a closer look.

Mark says the Pharisees and teachers of the law criticized the disciples because they ate with dirty hands. They really weren't criticizing the disciples, they were attacking Jesus. Why didn't Jesus teach his disciples the traditions of the elders? Mark tells us that Jewish traditions

required Jews, not only to wash their hands, but to wash their food and pots and pans. They weren't concerned about germs. They were concerned about contamination from unclean gentiles. They'd bump into gentiles in the market place. They'd buy food handled by gentiles. They'd handle money touched by gentiles. Gentiles, by definition, were unclean. When Pharisees touched gentiles they became ritually unclean, like when we were in elementary school and got "cooties" if we touched unpopular kids. The Pharisees feared they'd get spiritual "cooties" from physical contact with gentiles. So it was their tradition to wash their hands and food and pots and pans whenever they came into contact with gentiles.

The Pharisees and experts on law couldn't see how Jesus could ignore this important tradition. There was something to this tradition. Our mothers use to tell us, Don't hang around certain kids. Bad friends lead us down the wrong path. Jews feared contact with gentiles would lead to idolatry. Hang around with gentiles and the next thing you know you'll be fornicating, robbing, murdering, and all sorts of other mean and dirty things. So the Pharisees and teachers of the law ask Jesus, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"

Jesus responds with a quotation from Isaiah. "You hypocrites! Isaiah described you beautifully. You're so busy holding on to tradition that you forget God's commandments." In other words, bad traditions keep us from obeying God. Good traditions help us obey God. Jesus condemns bad traditions, not all traditions. Segregation was a bad tradition that grew up in America. It separated people on the basis of race. A hundred years ago, it was a Christian tradition to make African Americans sit in the balcony of the church. That was a bad tradition. It kept us from obeying God and loving our neighbor. Prayer is a good tradition. But maybe the tradition of public Christian prayer before public events is a bad tradition that needs to go

because it creates so much religious friction, it divides people, it makes Christians look intolerant, and drives people away from Christ. The Confederate flag is part of our national tradition, but flying the Confederate flag is a bad tradition because it alienates so many good American citizens.

Bad traditions prevent us from obeying and loving God and our neighbor. Here's an exercise for us. Go home today and talk about your traditions: family, national, community, and religious traditions: birthdays, religious holidays, national holidays, family gatherings. List all the traditions you can think of. Make a game of it. See who can come up with the longest list of traditions. Take the game a step further. How many of those traditions help you obey God and love your neighbor? How many traditions lead us to ignore God's commandments?

Highlight the good traditions. There are good traditions. The Gospels tell us that it was the tradition of Jesus to attend synagogue on the sabbath. It was his tradition to pray in the morning. It was his tradition to observe Jewish holy days. We see him going to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover and the Feast of Booths. And the apostle Paul tells us that he handed on to us a tradition that he, himself, received—the celebration of the Lord's Supper. And, again, Paul writes to the Thessalonian Christians, "Stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter." The trick is to correctly distinguish between good and bad traditions. Bad traditions undermine obedience to God. Good traditions strengthen our obedience to Christ. We need to get rid of bad traditions and begin new traditions. After you've made a list of your traditions and distinguished good from bad traditions. Think of new traditions that can strengthen our obedience to God and love for our neighbors?

Kay and I attended a performance of the Fiddler on the Roof at the Dutch Apple dinner theater years ago. The story deals with tradition. The story is told through Tevye, a poor Jew living in Russia at the turn of the last century. In his opening song Tevye sings about tradition. For him, tradition gives stability to his life. Yet, as the story unfolds, Tevye begins to realize that tradition isn't cast in concrete and unchangeable. He realizes that his five daughters have grown up in a different world than he did. At first his daughters make minor decisions which discard tradition. He struggles with deciding when to keep a tradition and when he needs to adapt to a new situation. He decides that sometimes tradition must bend to keep pace with a changing world, and for the sake of people. But the choices of his daughters escalate until finally one daughter wants to marry a non-Jew. He's not only of a different faith, he's a Russian soldier who's been involved in the persecutions of the Jewish community. Tevye can't bend that far. He says, "If I bend that far, I'll break."

The trick for us is to know how far to bend without breaking. How do we balance our experience of the past with a world that didn't exist even five years ago? How do we teach our children what's important, when so much is changing so rapidly? How shall we prepare them to face the 21st century? How do we maintain a moral and spiritual balance amid the relativism of modern culture? How far can we bend before we break? If we do not bend, will we simply become irrelevant to the modern world and lose the people we are trying to hold on to with the tradition?

We need traditions that strengthen our obedience to God and encourage love of neighbor.

But Jesus calls us to abandon traditions that undermine Christian worship and Christian love.