

September 1, 2024

Texts: Deuteronomy 4: 1-2, 6-9; Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Title: "Might the Pharisees Have Been Irish?"

Roman Catholics celebrate a feast day known as *Corpus Christi* (the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ; this year it was on May 30th). In some countries such as Ireland which is heavily Catholic, this is a big deal. In many of the rural communities there's a Corpus Christi procession through the streets of the parish. It's a yearly tradition. Altar boys go ahead of the procession ringing bells to alert the faithful that the procession is coming near. People come out of their houses, kneel, and cross themselves as the Holy Eucharist passes by.

Now it's easy to get to accustomed to these traditions to where you just do it automatically and don't think about it. A priest in this country wrote about some recent Irish immigrants who had just arrived in his parish and were unpacking their belongings in their new home. Suddenly they heard bells ringing in the street outside. The whole family immediately stopped what they were doing, went outside, knelt down, and crossed themselves--just as a Good Humor ice cream truck went by. Well, for some people eating ice cream is a sacrament. Let's talk for a few moments about the power of tradition.

Mark writes that the Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who'd come from Jerusalem were gathered around Jesus when they spotted something that offended them. Some of Jesus' disciples were eating without first going through a ritual of ceremonial hand washing. This wasn't a matter of hygiene but matter of religious ceremony (symbolism). So why, the Pharisees wondered, didn't Jesus'

followers keep this tradition as they, like Jesus, were devout Jews.

One thing to note is that if it wasn't for the many traditions of the Jewish faith, their community might not have survived all these years. Through much of their history they've been persecuted. The traditions served as a way of maintaining their identity.

Some of you remember "*Fiddler on the Roof*" and how important tradition was in the life of the Russian Jewish community in the early 1900's. In the movie, father Tevye felt threatened by the changes in the society of his time, some of which affected his own family. His youngest daughter asks his approval to marry an atheist. On this he would not compromise and loudly declares, "Some things I will not, cannot allow--tradition!"

Most of us can appreciate his predicament. The world is changing. It has always been changing. (Tell of the old traditions still referred to in the pre-marriage inventory) I read some years ago when studying the Myers-Briggs personality inventory, that a large majority of those who are active church members are of the types that appreciate tradition and always doing it the same way. I am one of those people myself. But I'm reminded occasionally by the people around me that this isn't always the way to go in life. I love a good idea. I just don't come up with that many entirely on my own. I need people around me that have creative thought processes and will share their ideas.

Tell of visit to the Episcopal Cathedral and its remodeling. A couple of years later I met the bishop and he told me the story of how this change was made.

Traditions are good. Traditions are powerful. They communicate foundational truths. They also, in some cases, turn off many who want flexibility and change.

So what was going on in our passage with the comments from the Pharisees? Jesus replies by quoting Isaiah... These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions."

Jesus wasn't really condemning the ritual practice of hand washing. No, he detected an attitude that he didn't like, an attitude that made them seem to be more loyal to the practices than what it represented. Apparently even a good thing can be taken too far and can become an idol in itself.

Here's the thing with some traditions and rituals. That over time, they can lose their significance as the era and the culture that they came out of changes as it inevitably does.

It is our hearts that Christ is concerned about. It's the inner person that he came to redeem. For the Pharisees religion was more of an external thing. In the regular practice of their rituals, their minds didn't focus on faith anymore and the meaning was lost. They had God on their lips, but not in their hearts.

Sometimes being faithful to the call of Christ and to his mission that we are about requires us to be flexible, open to change, and willing to create new traditions. Amen.