

“Argumentative Tradition”
Mark 7:1-8, 14-23 | Galatians 4:22 – 5:1
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I don't mind Jesus slamming hypocrisy or tradition. I just wish he would choose his examples a little more carefully. He could have condemned those who pray for peace while they invest in war; he could have condemned those who hand out their leftovers to the poor while hoarding more than what they need; he could have condemned those who wear their religion on their sleeve while they oppress the widow, the alien, and the orphan. Jesus could have chosen any of these example of hypocrisy to condemn, yet what does he choose? – hand washing. Try explaining this one to your non-Christian friends or to the children that grumble every time you force them to the bathroom sink. Yes, yes, Jesus requires us to wash feet, but condemns us for washing hands. You'll never see Jesus on a poster for the Centers for Disease Control. In fact if Mark's Jesus were here today he would probably be running around the church tearing down our handwashing posters, over-turning the tables loaded with hand sanitizer, and if he knew that we had once passed the peace here with fist bumps to keep from passing H1N1 swine flu, we'd be in big trouble.

As a Christian, there are some texts that are so anachronistic, they are embarrassing – and this is one of them. Jesus condemns the Pharisees for their hand washing as if the sinfulness of their concern for this practice is obvious. As if their concern is distracting them from what really matters in the practice of their faith. Boy, have times changed. I think we spent a whole worship committee meeting and part of a session meeting talking about efficacy of alcohol-based hand sanitizers vs. soap and water.

But I suppose it's not really fair to blame Jesus for not knowing about germ transmission. It's not fair to blame him for something that he had no way of knowing. And it's not like the Pharisees were washing their hands to stop the spread of germs. They were washing their hands for religious reasons. Most of us wash now our hands for different reasons. Our knowledge has changed. And with it, our way of living in the world.

Thankfully, you'll find soap and water in most churches today, yet the church has not always received new knowledge with open arms. In fact, the church has landed itself in trouble for holding onto traditions in the face of knowledge that calls them into question. The church used to hold that the earth was flat. Tradition needed to change. The church used to hold that slavery was ordained by God. Tradition needed to change. The church used to hold that women were not equal to men. Tradition needed to change. The church used to hold that gay and lesbian Christians. . .tradition still needs to change. All of those traditions and many other have been defended as decrees authored by God. Holy requirements that we ignore or abandon at our own peril.

That's what Jesus is critiquing. Traditions that we claim to be ordained by God that, in fact, contradict the commandments that God has given. Commandments to love God and love

our neighbors. “You abandon the commandment of God,” he says to the Pharisees, “and hold to human tradition.” Any tradition that obstructs rather than deepens our commitment to those commandments, Jesus argues, should be discarded.

Which raises more questions that it gives answers. How can we practice any ritual in the church without Jesus condemning it? And what about observant Jews of today? Do the words of *our* faith condemn the practice of theirs?

As I wrestled with this text this week, a memory came to mind. It was the beginning of the Jewish/Christian dialogue that I participated in with the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies. We had traveled to Atlanta and were meeting there for the first time – three Christian theologians and three Jewish theologians; three Christian pastors and three Jewish rabbis, three Christian and three Jewish educators, Jews and Christians – all gathering for the first time inside Temple Israel. The normal awkwardness that always permeates an initial gathering of strangers was already in the air as we prepared to serve our plates and share a common meal. But that awkwardness rose almost to the level of panic for me when I was called on to give an opening prayer. It was explained that the Institute had made the discovery through the years that it is better for Jews and Christians to pray in their own traditions alongside each other rather than watering down their prayers in well-intentioned signs of respect. It invites the kind of honesty and openness that makes for deeper relationships and deeper discoveries. I would pray from the Christian side and Rabbi Joel Zaiman, distinguished rabbi emeritus from Chizuk Amuno congregation here in Baltimore would pray from the Jewish side. I looked around noticed the expressions on the faces of my fellow Christian clergy. They were expressions of sympathy and relief like students who had been spared the humiliation they knew was coming to me.

And so, taking a deep breath, I prayed as I usually do, in Jesus’ name. Then Rabbi Zaiman proceeded to wash his hands, ritually, as I imagine the Pharisees might have done. And he spoke a blessing. He gave us an explanation that I cannot remember. But I couldn’t help but have reverence for this practice. Every time he eats, this ritual is a reminder that he is a Jew in the world – odd, set apart for God’s purposes. It is a ritual that reminds him of who he is in a world that wants to tell him who he should be. It is a ritual that deepens his commitment to God’s way in the world. It is a ritual that reminds him that whatever powers or forces compete for his allegiance, it is this God to whom he belongs, it is this God that he chooses to serve.

Since that time I have been in the presence of Jews arguing among themselves about what is required of them - whether keeping kosher is mandatory or not, of what one must be or do to remain faithful to the God of Israel. I have imagined that these arguments sound not too dissimilar from the arguments between Jesus and some of the Pharisees of his day – a Jew arguing among Jews about whether piety and its disciplines draw us deeper into covenantal obedience, or distracts us from the ethical obligations of our faith.

And Jesus doesn’t give us an easy answer to that question. It’s not like he’s throwing out all religious disciplines. Jesus taught his disciples to wash feet for religious reasons. He taught us to share a supper together for religious reasons. He went down to the river and was immersed in water for religious reasons. He doesn’t give us any easy answers about which disciplines deepen and which distract us from our commitment to God. No. It’s the *argument* that Jesus gives us. The argument that every new generation of the people of God have to have with themselves – arguing about which disciplines draw us deeper into covenantal obedience, and

which disciplines distract us from the ethical obligations of our faith. It's the *argument* that I think Jesus would want us to be having *within* our faith. Arguing over how to flesh out our commitment to the God of Israel. Arguing over how to practice a faith whose commandments must be interpreted in the midst of peoples, and powers, and situations we encounter right now. Arguing over how the sacred texts of our scriptures are speaking to us, leading us, challenging us, to live faithfully in the world that we encounter right now.

Arguing so that we may accurately embrace disciplines that remind us each day of who we are and whose we are – God's people who are called to love our God and love our neighbor at every moment of every day; and abandon disciplines that prevent us from doing so.

It's because of the arguing that I've done with other Christians that I believe we must not condemn those who are not Christian – we cannot condemn other human beings and love them as ourselves. It's generations of arguing that led our congregation to fight exclusion from the church and injustice in society on the basis of race, and later sexual orientation – we cannot love neighbors that we refuse to welcome. It's the arguing that has led us to do things that earlier generations condemned as unfaithful – like lighting candles in prayer even though it used to be too catholic, or shouting amen even though it used to be too Baptist, or preaching from the Old Testament even though it used to be too Jewish, because you can't be faithful to this God of love unless you are listening again and again for God's voice speaking in new ways. It's because of the arguing that I've done with other Christians that I do not condemn Jews for ritually washing their hands or keeping kosher – because I know too many Jews whose commitment to the God of Israel is deepened because of their practice; it's because of the arguing over what Paul meant in his letter to the Galatians that Christ has set us free that I can celebrate that freedom, but reject his claim that Gentiles are the true heirs of God's promises and Jews are children born of slavery. To the question of which disciplines, theologies, and practices distract and which deepen our commitment to God, Jesus gives us an argument.

Perhaps that's troubling news to a church that already seems embroiled in too many arguments in our time. Perhaps it's troubling news to those of us who believe some arguments are too obvious to waste our time arguing over. Perhaps it's troubling news to those of us who are weary of the same conversations had again and again within our faith over people and issues that affect us or are us. Each of us sometimes wish that God's way was etched in a tablet of our own making.

But it is good news, nonetheless. It's good news in a church too often marked by separation to know that God's way in the world is often revealed when we engage and wrestle with each other. It's good news to know that more light is shed on the meaning of the gospel when descendents of enemies are drawn together to argue in peace. It's good news to know that every time we wrestle over how ancient words are speaking to us today, God is with us, speaking to us again.

It's good news because it means that our faith is not dead, nor is our God silent. God is speaking to us, shaping us, forming us, healing us and our world all over again.