

Lectionary 22 Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost Year B August 29, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In his weekly video this week, Bishop Satterlee shared a story of leading worship last Sunday in which the congregations used the worship liturgy in the LBW (the green worship hymnal that was used before our new red one in the pews). Now, for those of you who don't know, Bishop Satterlee is legally blind. And so, while he was in seminary he made a point to memorize the three communion liturgies in the LBW because he knew that he would use them week after week and from one congregation to the next. This tradition has changed some with the "new" red hymnal (which isn't really all that new). Rather than setting the focus on a small number of pre-written texts and liturgies, the red hymnal outlines our pattern of worship, and provides suggested words for each part of the service, but always leaves room for congregations to choose something else. The hymnal clearly states that Lutheran worship follows the pattern of Gathering, Word, Meal, and Sending, but the words we use in worship don't always come straight out of the hymnal. There are online and printed resources that provide seasonal texts, and some pastors even choose to write their own pieces of the liturgy, like eucharistic prayers or confession and forgiveness. This has led to a situation where a congregation—or especially a bishop who visits a different congregation most weeks—uses a liturgy that may never be used again.

Certainly, for someone who is legally blind, this can present a challenge for memorization each week. Rather than stepping securely from stepping stone to stepping stone, Bishop Satterlee shared that leading worship can be filled with the worry about getting the words wrong. And certainly, in his head, and in his work, he understands that the hymnal had become outdated and needed to change, and he isn't bothered by it. But his heart was glad as he led this familiar liturgy. And so, for Bishop Satterlee, attending and leading worship from the LBW last week, leading the liturgies that he memorized and knew by heart, it was like coming home. They were the traditional words that were near and dear to his heart.

Bishop Satterlee then goes on to reflect that this experience speaks to our Gospel reading for today, when the Pharisees criticize Jesus' disciples for eating with unclean hands, in violation of the tradition of the elders. And he, and perhaps we, too, can understand where the Pharisees are coming from. Traditions are comfortable and familiar, and we appreciate our traditions, especially when everything around us seems to be changing so quickly. We all have those traditions where in our minds, we understand why they may need to change, but we grieve the change and loss of the tradition in our hearts. Human beings are traditional folk, we hold our traditions deep within ourselves, and they can often help to form our identities. And so, it's okay to love tradition.

And our reading from Deuteronomy seems to support keeping up with tradition. In Deuteronomy, God commands, "You must neither add anything to what I command, nor take away anything from it, but you shall observe the commandments of the LORD your God with which I am charging you." In other words, we're supposed to keep the commandments. We're supposed to hold on to God's covenant with us and the traditions that come with it, and teach them to our children and our children's children.

So, why then does Jesus seem to be criticizing the Pharisees and their love of tradition? While we might want to get upset with Jesus at this point for seeming to want to throw away all tradition, there's more to the story here.

When Jesus challenges the Pharisees traditions, it's not the tradition itself that is the problem. The problem for Jesus is when we use the tradition to condemn and exclude others, to dismiss them and ignore them. We say to ourselves, "They don't do things the way that we do, so they can't worship with us." Or, "They do things differently, and so we don't trust them." It's not about throwing away tradition, it's about challenging the power structures of society, and the ways that the traditions had been misused in order to gain power. The Pharisees were using tradition as a way to exclude people from the church, to name them as outcasts of society. It was a way to limit some peoples' power and influence, while gaining more power themselves.

And so, what Jesus invites us to look at is not how well others do or do not observe the traditions, but we are called to examine our own hearts. When we cling to traditions, why is it that we love them so much? What are our values? What are our intentions? What are our motivations? What animates our hearts?

If the tradition is meant to make it harder for certain people to become part of the church, then maybe the tradition needs to change. If the tradition helps us identify who is "in" and who is "out," then maybe the tradition needs to go. But other traditions can stay—perhaps if the tradition is a tool for sharing God's abundant and life-giving love with the world, and growing the kingdom of God without limit.

The tradition of washing hands before eating—while it certainly has some health benefits—was being used as a means to exclude some people from the community. And so, Jesus makes it very clear that what goes into a person cannot defile, or diminish, or corrupt a person. But what comes out of a person—our actions, our words, our attitudes, our misused traditions—these can defile and destroy.

And so, these two readings from Deuteronomy and the Gospel of Mark are read together in worship today to become a balance for one another. They allow us to live with the tension between keeping the tradition, and throwing the tradition out. And within the church, we've been holding that tension for quite a while. We must regularly question whether the old way of doing things, the traditional way of doing things, is the right way, is the best way, is the most life-giving way in our current context. We must constantly evaluate how our traditions fit within our community and world, and how we can better communicate God's love.

But the good news is that through baptism, Jesus enters into our hearts, and Jesus transforms our hearts—even our hearts that love tradition. Jesus inside us bursts open our stony hearts the same way Jesus burst open the tomb, and we come bursting forth with new life. So, we are called to be attentive to the way that Christ is at work in our hearts—because Christ *is* at work in us—and see how God is calling us to new life. With Christ in us, working on our hearts, tradition, change, and transformation can—and do—bring new life to the church and the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.