

Sticks and Stones

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Matthew 15:1-20

1 Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, 2 “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.” 3 He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? 4 For God said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ 5 But you say that whoever tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,’ then that person need not honor the father. 6 So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. 7 You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:
8 ‘This people honors me with their lips,
 but their hearts are far from me;
9 in vain do they worship me,
 teaching human precepts as doctrines.’”

10 Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: 11 it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” 12 Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” 13 He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. 14 Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” 15 But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” 16 Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? 17 Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? 18 But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. 19 For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. 20 These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

PROUD WORDS

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” With all due respect to the author who wrote All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten, this is something I learned in kindergarten that I did not need to know.

Why? It’s not true.

Words do hurt. The wrong words hurt me, and the wrong words hurt you. If I had to quote someone on the danger of the words we use, I guess it would be Carl Sandburg. He wrote,

“Look out how you use proud words. When you let proud words go, it is not easy to call them back. They wear long boots, hard boots; they walk off proud; they can't hear you calling-- Look out how you use proud words.”

How many times have we wished that we had chosen our words more carefully? Proud words can't hear you calling.

I have saved every sermon I have ever written, whether that sermon deserved to be saved or not. (And many did not deserve to be saved by the way.) But, I do often read those old sermons to see how my views have changed, and sometimes when I read what I wrote so long ago I think, “Maybe God can forgive me for saying that.”

Those of us who serve as ministers of the Word and Sacrament have to be particularly careful about the words we use. We claim to be speaking for God, but sometimes the words we use are proud words.

Sometimes the things we talk about are not all that important. Sometimes we lay requirements on people that are not necessary and even harmful.

HAND WASHING

That's what our lesson for today is about. The religious leaders from Jerusalem come to Jesus and ask, “Why do your disciples break our tradition by not washing their hands before they eat?”

Once again that sounds like something that I learned in kindergarten. You can almost hear your mom saying, “You don't know what your hands have touched. There are germs everywhere. Wash your hands before you eat.”

But, the religious officials from Jerusalem weren't worried about cleanliness. They were worried about godliness, a peculiar kind of godliness that came from following an elaborate and exacting ritual. They were saying in effect,

“Jesus, if you're so pious, if you're from God, they why do your disciples seem so common and unholy? Why don't they follow all our rules and regulations?”

If they were Presbyterian they would have asked,
“Why don’t your people do everything decently and in order?”

The hand washing ceremony prescribed by Jewish tradition was quite elaborate. The hands had to be held out, palms up, hands cupped slightly, and water was poured over them.

Then the fist of one hand was used to scrub the other, and then the other fist would scrub the first hand.

Finally the hands were again held out, with palms down, and water was poured over them a second time to cleanse away the dirty water the defiled hands had been scrubbed with. Only then would a person’s hands be ceremonially clean. In a world where clean water was at a premium this was a hard tradition to follow.

The story is told of a rabbi who was imprisoned by the Romans. He used the drinking water brought to him in his solitary dungeon cell to wash his hands in this way.

And he almost died of thirst. Such was the importance of this practice.

TRADITIONS TRANSFORMED BY FEAR

These rituals seem strange to us, but they did serve a purpose. These customs enabled the Jews to remember that they were God’s chosen people. It was a way of saying that we are “clean” and those other people, those Gentiles are not. We are called to be different from them.

We have different traditions, but we cling to those traditions just as tenaciously. We too sometimes attempt to say through our traditions, “This is what makes us different from those other people. We’re not like those other people and here’s why.”

The ritualistic hand washing was originally an attempt to remind devout people that they were chosen by God to be a light to the world. They were to live righteous and holy lives.

This rite symbolized this desire to be pure and holy.

But, by Jesus’ time faith had been replaced by fear. Their rituals had become rigid and devoid of their original meaning.

Out of fear they followed the traditions of the elders without question. They seemed to think that if even one tradition were compromised the whole religion would fall.

Fear still does that to us. Fear turns minor concerns into obsessions. We become so accustomed to doing something in a certain way that we forget why it is important. Ritual can become superstition and even hinder the work of God.

Harry Emerson Fosdick told about a church in Denmark where the worshippers bowed regularly before a certain spot on the wall. They had been doing that for three centuries, bowing at that one spot in the sanctuary. Nobody could remember why.

Then one day while renovating the church, they removed some of the whitewash on the walls. At the exact spot where the people bowed, they found the image of the Madonna under the whitewash.

People had become so accustomed to bowing before that image that even after it was covered up they still bowed.

For three centuries they still bowed!

Sometimes traditions lose their meaning and even get in the way of true faith. Sometimes traditions even separate us from the people we are called to serve.

We get so bound up with our proud words and our nitpicking way of deciding who is right and who is wrong, that we actually disobey God in order to accommodate our tradition. We bow to the empty wall and worship the famous last words of the church, “We’ve always done it that way.”

TRADITION VERSUS GOD’S WORD

Jesus gave the religious leaders an example of how their tradition had messed up their faith. “The Bible says honor your father and mother. But, you say that if someone tells his or her parents, ‘I have dedicated all my money to God,’ then you don’t owe your parents anything. You elevate your tradition over the Word of God.”

One of the Ten Commandments is “honor your father and mother”. And one of the things that “honor” means is to take care of your father and mother in their old age. In fact, just as it often happens in our time, fathers and mothers would

give property to their children so that the children could have the resources necessary to take care of the parents in their old age.

But, apparently some of these adult children were greedy. And so the religious leaders created a loophole in the law to take advantage of this situation. Many large organizations now have a plan where you can donate money to them upon your death. But, until you die they pay you a high interest rate on that money. It's a win/win according to those who promote such giving.

Well, the religious authorities of Jesus' day were doing something similar. A person in Jesus' day could declare property Corban that is dedicated to the Temple. Once they did that, then that asset couldn't be sold for the benefit of the parents.

The religious establishment encouraged this practice because the deferred gift ultimately made its way into the temple treasury.

And that's why Jesus called the religious leaders hypocrites. They pretended to be interested in God's law, but in reality they were only interested in gaining wealth for themselves.

ARE WE BLIND?

It would be easy to say, "Isn't it awful what those Scribes and Pharisees did. How could they be so blind?"

But, I'm afraid Jesus wasn't just talking to them. I'm thinking he was talking to us as well. We say that God's Word takes precedence over our tradition. We say that God's Word takes precedence over our words.

But, saying that and putting that into practice are two different things. When we look at the history of our church and when we look at our own history we realize the hard truth. Our proud words have often prevented us from obeying God's Word.

Like the religious leaders of old we have concentrated on the wrong thing. We have become overly concerned about building a fence around the church. We have concentrated on keeping that dirty world out of our pious kingdom instead of welcoming everyone in.

But, if we do that, we miss the whole point of the gospel. The gospel is, after all, good news *for the world*. And if we build a fence around God's kingdom, Isaiah's prophecy becomes applicable to us as well.

We honor God with our lips, but our hearts are far from God. Our doctrines are based upon tradition instead of God's Word. And we turn the good news into good advice.

When we read about religious leaders who thought that ritual hand washing was a central issue in God's kingdom, we shake our heads in disbelief. How could they think this was such an important mark of piety while they neglected the more important aspects of God's Word?

But, I wonder.

Fifty or a hundred years from now when people read the history of the church in our era, I wonder if people might also shake their head and say, "What were those crazy Presbyterians thinking about? Why were they so interested in those minor things when there were much more pressing issues?"

Are we also the blind leading the blind? Are we too in danger of falling off the cliff together? Have we been majoring in minors so long that we can no longer see the forest for the trees?

Those are not easy questions to answer. We cannot escape tradition. Tradition is the sea in which we swim. Indeed, at its best tradition gives us important guidance.

But, tradition must not prevent us from hearing God's Word and being led by the Spirit.

A CHANGE OF HEART

The Bible tells us that it's a matter of the heart. When we have a heart for God we spend less time keeping people out and more time letting God in.

And how do we know if God is in our heart? We know that our heart has been changed by what we say and what we do. Jesus said, "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."

Evil intention and evil action come from a heart that is self-centered and afraid. And from that fearful, self-centered heart comes proud words. And according to Jesus those proud words are at the root of all that is destructive.

The Bible has a lot to say about this. For example, in the book of James we read that the tongue is a fire, and how great a forest can be set on fire by just a little blaze. In fact, the flames of hell are fanned by the wrong words. (James 3:5-6, 8)

Down through the ages the church has been plagued by religious leaders who were preoccupied with outward religious ceremony instead of the inner transformation of the heart. And the results have been tragic.

How many Christians have been executed for a difference of opinion on the meaning of the Lord's Supper? How many Christians have been persecuted because of a difference of opinion on the mode of baptism? How many Christians have been banished because they failed to bow to church authority?

The answer to all those questions is too many. As one commentator put it, "The hearts of men and women that are so incurably religious are also incurably evil, apart from the grace of God."

Unfortunately, we see vivid examples of the same phenomena every day.

Violence all over the world is sometimes incited by the proud words of religious tradition.

Relationships and families have been torn apart by proud words. Congregations have been destroyed by proud words.

Proud words seem to take on a life of their own, and create a world of hurt.

GOD'S WORD

But, I believe that just as the wrong words can create chaos, the right Word can create peace. Just as God tamed the chaos in creation and brought divine order to the universe so God's Word can change, can recreate our lives and the world in which we live.

It all begins with what comes out of our mouth.

What do we say and how do we say it? That makes all the difference. That is a sign of what is in our heart.

I believe the church is called to be gentle on the ears. Harsh words hurt, but God's Word heals. The church lives up to her high calling when she speaks words of hope and love in difficult situations.

The church lives up to her high calling when her words build bridges instead of walls. The church lives up to her high calling when she speaks words of peace. The church lives up to her high calling when she creates a community based on faith instead of fear.

I heard someone say, "We have to decide if we're going to be the kind of church that casts out heretics or the kind of church that seeks new converts."

I think Jesus came down on the side of new converts. For Jesus faith was not about ritualistic restrictions. Faith was about seeking the lost sheep. Faith was about changed hearts and a new way of living.

It's no accident that the next story in Matthew's gospel is another one of those stories about a woman from the wrong side of the tracks and the wrong side of the border. She was one of the unclean ones excluded from the table of God's grace.

But, Jesus dared to cross the border. And before the story was over this foreigner was revealed to be a person of great faith and an example of the kingdom that was coming.

Sticks and stones do break our bones, and the wrong words do hurt us. But, as Ellen Crawford put it in the devotional magazine *These Days*,

"The body of Christ is stronger and more faithful when we speak loving, hopeful words in the name of the one who braved sticks and stones that all our brokenness might be healed and redeemed."

Let us encourage one another with those words.

Amen.