

“What Traditions Should We Keep?”

In the opening scene of the movie *Fiddler On the Roof*, Tevya sings the theme song “Tradition”. Traditions are an important part of life, aren’t they?

Can you think of some traditions that are well known? How about the Army-Navy game in the fall. The Polar Bear Club - taking a dip in a river or lake on January 1st. The new President taking the oath of office in January. Many traditions surround the holidays. Turkey on Thanksgiving Day. Pork and Sauerkraut on New Year’s Day (a Lancaster County tradition). Shooting off fireworks and firecrackers on July 4th. Traditions are beliefs, practices, rituals that are passed down from one generation to another, and can give stability and meaning to life.

Tradition plays a big role in the church and in the life of faith. For instance, Christians have been handed down a body of teaching that’s at the heart of our faith. 1 Corinthians 15, verses 3 through 6, describe the tradition at the central core of Christianity. "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time." Notice the tradition: Christ died for sins, was buried, on the third day He was raised from the dead, and appeared to His disciples and many others.

But let’s look at a Scripture passage that puts tradition in a different light! "Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, 'Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!'"(Matthew 15:1-3).

Some scribes and Pharisees (religious leaders) traveled from Jerusalem just to question Jesus on why His disciples didn’t wash their hands before they ate. This was not about washing the dirt off their hands before a meal – like the mother who says to the child who's been out playing, "Wash your hands before you eat!" This had to do with being *ritually and ceremonially pure*. To the strict Jew, many things were regarded as “unclean”. If you came into contact with a person or object regarded as unclean, you were not religiously pure and couldn’t come before God. So, just in case you touched something “unclean”, it was prescribed that you wash your hands in a certain way before you ate. (They even did this ceremonial hand washing between courses of their meal!) The ritual itself was elaborate and meticulous!

Where did these laws and traditions of hand washing come from? In the Old Testament we have God's laws and commands - the Ten Commandments - and numerous other laws. But over the years Jews developed what was called “oral law” or the “tradition of the elders” – rules that were supposed to show people how to *understand* and *apply* the written laws of God. (This oral law eventually was written down about the 2nd century and became known as The Mishnah).

By the time of Jesus, many Jews regarded these man-made *oral laws* to be just as important as the *written commandments* of God in Scripture. (Like today, if a Bible *commentary* becomes just as important and sacred as the *Scripture* itself!). There were no commandments that said people had to wash their hands in a certain ritualistic manner before they ate. This was part of

the *oral law*. So when Jesus' disciples didn't go through the rigmarole of washing their hands in a prescribed fashion they weren't violating *Scripture*, but the *oral tradition*. Jesus response to this was very blunt: "Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?" (Matthew 15:3).

Jesus then gives an example of a way they do this: "God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death'. But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is 'devoted to God', they are not to 'honor their father or mother' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition" (Matthew 15:4-6). One of the Ten Commandments says honor your father and mother. That included looking after one's parents when they were old and couldn't take care of themselves. But the Pharisees found a way to get around that.

One of these *oral laws* said you could declare your goods and property "Corbin" – "dedicated to God". You could give your goods over to God as an offering rather than give it to your parents. But what people were doing was claiming their property as "Corbin" – then *keeping it* for themselves – shirking their duty to their parents. By holding to this man-made *tradition* they were rejecting God's command to honor their parents.

Now, traditions can serve a useful purpose. In *Fiddler on the Roof*, when Tevya sings the theme song "Tradition" he at one point turns to his audience and explains the value of tradition: "Our tradition tells us who God is and who we are." Traditions can do that! *But not always!* 1 Corinthians 15 speaks of the tradition at the core of Christianity: so important! But Matthew 15 illustrates traditions that actually were undermining God's commandments and keeping people from God!

You know what: It's easy in the church to get these 2 mixed up! Every congregation develops its own traditions. I can think of traditions that had developed in some of the churches I've served: Having a Mother-Daughter dinner in the spring. A Christmas bazaar in early December. Recognizing choir members at the end of the season in May or June. Using the International Lesson Series in an adult Sunday School class. Having a mother preach on Mother's Day. Always serving communion at the altar.

But what happens sometimes is that these traditions get entrenched in a congregation and become *a sacred cow!* You don't touch them without risking your life! God help the pastor who messes with the women's society's "Secret Sister" banquet, which is always held the third Wednesday night in May! Or God have mercy on the person who even hints at doing away with the annual Christmas cantata (even though the choir may be down to 6 people)!

Isn't it true, we can elevate these human traditions in our congregations to the level that they become just as important as what God says in the Bible! One of the cherished traditions Jesus gave to the Church is *communion, the Lord's Supper*. "Do this," He said, "in remembrance of Me." In 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul writes how he received from the Lord and passed on to them the tradition of Holy Communion: "For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to

you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

Here we are, 2,000 years later, maintaining that tradition established by Jesus! But Jesus never said *how* we are to take communion! So, here's this church where they *always* take communion in their seats. A new pastor arrives on the scene, and decides to have communion by *intinction*: the people form a line, come up front, receive a piece of bread and dip it in the wine or grape juice contained in a glass or goblet. Oh my. *How dare* Rev. So-and-So change the way we do communion! And so the church's local tradition becomes more important than the meaning of the sacrament itself. You get the point.

Let's try something. I will name some things we do in the church and you tell me whether this is commanded by God in the Bible, or just human-made tradition. Ok?

Sunday School – word of God or man-made tradition? The modern Sunday School movement began around 1785 in England. Jesus commanded *teaching and discipling* people! But He never commanded that we have Sunday School classes. The real issue is how best to teach and disciple people in the 21st century. Sunday morning classes may or may not be the best way to help people grow in their faith.

Dressing up for church – are we commanded to do that in the Bible? If we are insisting that women must wear a dress and men wear a dress shirt and tie, and that hinders people in our *casual culture* from coming to worship, can we give up that man-made tradition? It doesn't say anywhere in the Bible that kids shouldn't wear jeans in church. (Modesty, yes. Types of clothing, no).

Singing hymns out of a hymnal, accompanied by an organ – command of God or human tradition? You don't find the modern organ and church hymnals in the New Testament church. For many, classic church hymns and organ music help bring them closer to God. For an increasing number of people, traditional hymns sung with a piano or organ mean little. The Bible says we are to *sing unto the Lord*, but it doesn't define the style of music we use.

If you look at what we do in the church, most of it is not based on the Bible or God's commandments, but on man-made traditions that have emerged over the years. Now, please! I'm not saying we should get rid of all this. *But I am saying that we ought to look at these traditions and ask whether or not they are worth keeping!*

Some of the traditional practices in our churches can actually hurt people and alienate them from God and the church. I read about something that happened in a Roman Catholic Church. A little five year-old girl wanted to take her first communion. But she was allergic to wheat, so her parents asked if she could take communion with a rice wafer instead. The church said, "No". So

is it breaking a divine commandment to keep a little girl safe as she takes the Lord's Supper?

Many of our church practices and traditions have little to do with ministering to a hurting world or bringing lost people to faith in Christ. In some churches, people get more excited and spend more time and energy preparing for the monthly pancake breakfast or the semi-annual rummage sale than they do reaching out to community needs or sharing the gospel with lost people. Mike Slaughter graduated from seminary, and was appointed to a little country church where the biggest event was their bean supper. Mike said Jesus didn't do bean suppers, and he stopped them. He began to meet with a few people in his living room to study the Book of Acts, and learn how to be the church, and that little church, Ginghamburg United Methodist Church, is now a dynamic megachurch with a remarkable ministry and mission to the whole world.

I believe this whole discussion about traditions is very pertinent to what we are experiencing in the church today! COVID-19 has changed the playbook for the Church! Over the last 12-13 months most churches have been unable to meet in person for a big chunk of that time. Our tradition has been to meet Sunday morning (or Saturday night), in a building. That defines "church", right? Wrong! Through COVID we've been reminded of what we should have known all along: the church is not a building. It's not a place to go to. *It's people.* And we can be the church even when we can't be in a building. Or even be physically together.

The church of the first century was dynamic, and exploded in growth throughout the world. They had no church buildings. They met in homes. There are countries and places in the world today where Christians are forbidden to meet. Churches have been closed by a hostile government. And yet these are some of the places where Christianity is most alive and vital in the world, and the faith is spreading!

So COVID-19 has shut down our buildings, but it has not shut down the Church! Some of our traditions have had to be put on the shelf. We've had to adapt. We've done our worship by streaming on Facebook or YouTube. We've held our meetings as Zoom meetings. This past Christmas Eve some of us at Community UMC had a Christmas Eve get-together, not in person, but electronically!

What the post-COVID church is going to look like, nobody knows for sure. But it probably will be different than it was in February of 2020. Some traditions we may have to drop in order to be the church of the post-COVID era. But that doesn't mean we will dispense with the core of our faith, or the essence of what it means to be the church: which is people interacting with people.

There is a rather bizarre story out of Key West, Florida. A 78 year-old man died, and it took two months for his roommate to notice that the man was dead! A police detective reported what the surviving roommate said, "He said the guy (the dead roommate) was very stubborn and wouldn't answer him." Is there a moral in this story for us today? Sometimes traditions are dead, and no longer speak to people, but we don't even "get it" that they're dead!

Tradition! There is a core of tradition at the heart of Christianity that tells us who God is and who we are! We don't even want to let go of that! But sometimes we need to ditch some of the man-made traditions that no longer serve a useful purpose.

