



WHAT MATTERS AND WHAT DOESN'T

September 2, 2018, Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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

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O LORD, Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.

The first Broadway show I ever saw on stage was *Fiddler on the Roof*. Living in New York City now, I'm overwhelmed by the diversity of talent on stage in this city. But that diversity was not something I was aware of as a young adult living in Durham, North Carolina. When my husband I decided to see *Fiddler* at the brand new performing arts center in Durham, I chose it because of the familiar title and some basic knowledge I had of the story. I had no idea how the music, costumes, set, and choreography would help bring the story of Tevye and his family to life.

To this day, it's hard for me to hear the word "tradition" and not think of the opening number in the musical. By a show of hands, who knows the story of *Fiddler on the Roof*? Anyone see the recent revival? As a recap...the story centers on Tevye, the father of five daughters, and his desire to maintain Jewish traditions in a small village in Imperial Russia, at the turn of the century. Throughout the story, Tevye must cope both with the strong-willed actions of his daughters, and the eventual eviction of the Jews from their village. The musical opens with Tevye telling the audience how his family finds balance in this village, focusing on TRADITION! Everyone plays their part, they keep their customs, even if they don't know why, and they find balance and harmony, just like the lone fiddler



playing on the roof.¹ Tradition helps them know who they are and what God expects each of them to do.

I love the line at the beginning where Tevye says, “How did these traditions get started? I’ll tell you... I don’t know, but it’s a tradition.” Well, this morning the passage from Deuteronomy gives us a hint as to how the traditions of his people started. In this section of Deuteronomy, Moses has gathered the people for his final discourses, giving instructions to them before they enter the Promised Land. And a significant part of Moses’ speech is a reminder of the commands God has given them and why they are called to follow them. Moses doesn’t tell the people—follow these commands because they are your tradition. Instead, Moses says, follow these commands because you belong to God, you are God’s children; you are God’s message to the world. And he adds, don’t add anything to these commands or take anything away; the commands come from God who made you, don’t let them become your invention. Furthermore, Moses tells them to pass these stories on to the generations that come after them, because by following them, they will witness to the world just who their God is. God’s people don’t follow these commands for tradition’s sake, but because by following them they witness to God’s story.

Within many religions there are doctrines and traditions that people of that faith follow. Tradition is how faith is lived out. Traditions can include orders of worship, what clergy wear, how leaders are chosen, and how the sacraments are celebrated. For example, as Presbyterians here at Brick, our worship is full of traditional elements. The black robes that we wear today are known as Geneva Robes, a tradition that goes back to Geneva, Switzerland. In a similar, but much older, way, Orthodox Christian churches are known for their own rich history and doctrine. Some of their traditions include extravagant iconography, truly ancient liturgy still sung in the original Greek, and often conservative dress. Sometimes, women are expected to cover their heads and wear modest dresses. These are traditions.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7V2lxFWBqfl>



That leads me to a story...one Sunday an orthodox parish received a visit from Father Anthony Bloom, a high-ranking bishop in the Russian Orthodox Church. Father Bloom was well known as a pastor, preacher, spiritual director and writer on the Christian life.² But on this one particular occasion he gave the shortest sermon he ever delivered. He stood before the congregation and said this: “Last night a woman with a child came to this church. She was in trousers and with no headscarf. Someone scolded her. She left. I do not know who did that, but I am commanding that person to pray for her and her child to the end of his days to God for their salvation. Because of you she may never go to church again.” Then, according to the congregation, “he turned around, head down, and [sat]. That was the entire sermon.”³

In our story from Mark today, Jesus offers his audience a scolding not unlike the one given by Orthodox Bishop Anthony Bloom. When we meet Jesus today in Galilee, some teachers of the law are challenging him on the way his disciples do or do not obey Jewish laws. They come to Jesus, some all the way from Jerusalem, and want an explanation as to why Jesus’ disciples do not follow the traditions of the elders, instead eating with unclean hands. This is not a conversation about hygiene; instead, this is a challenge to Jesus on which God he follows if his own disciples do not keep the same traditions as the religious leaders. However, hearing their criticism, Jesus doesn’t miss a beat—rebuking their challenge, he tells these teachers of the law that they have abandoned God’s commands and are instead worshipping their own human traditions.

Jesus critiques these religious leaders because, from his perspective, the traditions have become the religion. United Methodist theologian Will Willimon reminds us that the Pharisees and teachers of the law believed in faith affecting every part of your life.⁴ For them, washing hands, a sacred act of cleansing, was a public witness to their faith in God. Yet Jesus critiques these leaders for “majoring in the minors” because they have made the tradition, handwashing, their focus. They critique the

² http://www.mitras.ru/eng/eng_biog.htm

³ https://www.easterndiocese.org/news_180704_1.html

⁴ <https://vimeo.com/286799547>



disciples for not obeying human traditions, and Jesus sees the damage this judgmental reproach can cause. If we return to Moses' words back in the desert, these teachers of the law have missed the point. The commands of God were meant to be a blessing, a setting apart of God's people. Israel has a unique relationship with God and that uniqueness was marked by particular commands and gifts. In this debate between Jesus and the Pharisees, the religious authorities are worshipping the tradition, the rules, rather than the gracious God of Israel who gave them the commands to begin with.

The issues of legalism and religiosity are a part of every major religion. God is eternal and greater than our understanding, and human tradition is how we often make sense of and practice our faith in God. In Christian terms, because Jesus entered our very world and redeemed it, our human traditions are holy expressions of our relationship with God. Today, we share communion with ordinary elements of bread and juice. We baptize with New York City tap water. But Jesus' reminder today cautions us that too often we wind up worshipping our human traditions rather than the eternal God that gave them to us. Will Willimon says that the seven last words of every church that ever died are, quote, "we never did it that way before."⁵

I just finished a book this summer by a new young author from the Iowa Writers Workshop called *A Place for Us*.⁶ It is a story about an immigrant family making a life in a foreign culture, and it speaks to this problem of legalism within religious traditions. The story explores the complex and dynamic relationship of three children growing up with their immigrant parents in California. The parents, especially the father, are keen on keeping their family's traditions and Muslim faith intact, regardless of American customs. At the beginning of the story, the father appears strict and overly demanding, and his son, who becomes the dominant character, struggles with a faith he sees defined only by a list of rules. The son repeats a story he remembers from childhood about how each sin he commits leaves a stain on his life, stains he's worried he'll never be able to rid himself of.

⁵ <https://vimeo.com/286799547>

⁶ <https://www.amazon.com/Place-Us-Fatima-Farheen-Mirza/dp/1524763551>



This son sees his father's faith as focused solely on tradition and rules, and this creates a great distance between him and his family. The tragedy of the story, by the end, is that the father doesn't actually have a legalistic view of faith, but out of fear, that's what he ends up communicating to his children. He's so afraid of losing his children to American customs that his strict adherence to tradition makes him overbearing and controlling. I won't spoil the ending, but it's safe to say, in this story, that the father comes to his own revelations about how his fear of losing tradition leads him in passing on a legalistic faith to his children.

It seems, almost every faith group struggles with this tension, how to remain faithful without majoring in the minors. Remember, religion is a human invention—a set of traditions and rituals in response to a divine encounter. Apparently, Jesus's challenge to the Pharisees' legalism is still a common debate. Jews might argue about whether or not to keep kosher. Muslim women may argue about whether or not you have the wear a hijab to be faithful. Christians argue over who can come to the table and the proper way to baptize. Tradition is important, it's our human expression of faith and it binds communities together, but when it becomes our focus, it ends up tearing those same communities apart.

Jesus challenges the Pharisees in this text because he sees the dangers of what they're doing. New Testament theologian NT Wright argues that tradition—what we've always done—is almost always an argument that has more politics than scripture behind it.⁷ Whether or not you agree with NT Wright, it's true that tradition can become its own religion. And that, I think, is why Jesus presents this challenge to the Pharisees. As those who have become authorities, teachers of the law in 1st century Jerusalem, Jesus offers a check on their motives. Who are they worshipping—God or their ancestors? Who are they following if God cannot upend, or even transform, their traditions?

In this story, and throughout the Gospels, Jesus heavily questions those who are focusing on the minors—placing emphasis on the traditions, rather than the God whom they worship. Remember, this is the same Jesus who heals on the Sabbath,

⁷ My take on this passage's commentary from *Mark for Everyone* (WJK, 2001), "God's Law and Human Tradition" page 87.



touches the unclean, and hangs around with outcasts. Jesus continually offers another way, yet interestingly he doesn't really come down with a definitive answer for how to balance God's commands and human tradition. Then again, how could he? That would've become one more tradition...

If you remember, back in *Fiddler on the Roof* Tevye was seeking balance. Adhering to his religious traditions in a foreign land isn't easy, and he knows it. He also knows that it's important, but what he has to figure out—what he has to discern over and over again—is how not to major in the minors. We too must seek to find balance between the eternal commands of God and our human traditions.

As Christians we've inherited thousands of years of traditions, 250 years-worth just here at Brick Church. Yet if we long to be faithful in the here and now, we need to hear Jesus' challenge to the Pharisees. We need to check our own practices of faith and make sure that we are not putting tradition and legalism above God's good news. We need, ultimately, to find the same balance that Tevye sought, the delicate balance of a fiddler on a roof.

Amen.