

**Exodus 20:1-17**

**Mark 7:1-23**

**August 9, 2015**

**Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC**

## **SACRED COWS AND BEST PRACTICES**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

In response to a blog about “what matters and what doesn’t” in the church, a minister remembered his first, rural, red-front-doors congregation. When the people gathered for worship, the members of the church council sat on the back row of the church every Sunday. The attendance of other members of the congregation varied, but each Sunday the council members lined up on the back row of the sanctuary. After he had been there a couple of months, the minister had to ask, “Why do you all sit lined up on the back row?”

It seems that, when the congregation was very young, the congregation was afraid of an Indian attack. The church council took on the job of watching from the bell tower for approaching danger. Although the church was never attacked, the council members did spot a house fire one time. After one hundred twenty-five years, the council members still sat lined up on the back row of the sanctuary.<sup>1</sup>

Someone has commented that we church folks are good “at making a trivial thing into a tradition, making the tradition into symbol, turning the symbol into faith, and finally transforming the symbol into law.”<sup>2</sup> For instance, consider the white cloth that covers the communion table in many churches. My first memory of communion is from the Shades Valley Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The table was set with the bread and cup trays and everything was covered with a white cloth.

In some churches, the removal of the white tablecloth is an elaborate production, with the elders or women of the Church carefully folding the tablecloth, almost as if they were folding an American flag at a graveside service. But, do you know why some churches, especially in the South, started putting white tablecloths over the communion elements of bread and wine? Before there was air conditioning, churches would have the windows and doors open on a Sunday morning so the breeze could blow through. With the doors and windows open, flies would come in and land on the bread and cup. The white tablecloth kept the flies off the elements.

Once air conditioning was introduced in churches, the doors and windows were shut and the flies stayed outside. Still, many churches continued to cover their communion tables with white tablecloths. They even developed meaning and symbolism for the cloth, none of which can be found in the biblical accounts of Jesus eating the Last Supper with his disciples. As with so many things in the church, the original purpose of the practice was forgotten, but the tradition was strongly maintained.

When I was in seminary, I drove to New Orleans on a break to stay with my elderly grandfather for a few days. We called him Bumpa. On Sunday morning, we went to

our family church where I was baptized and where my grandfather had served as an elder and clerk of session. Bumpa had told the minister that I was coming to visit and that I was a seminary student. The minister invited me to read one of the scripture lessons during worship that day. When it was time for the offering and offertory, the minister reached under the pulpit, pulled out a violin, and began to play the offertory. He was quite good, and apparently he played in worship quite often. However, my grandfather didn't think very highly of his minister playing the violin in the worship service. I have often wondered what Bumpa would think of me playing handbells in worship!

Another Presbyterian minister who played the violin ran into problems about music in worship. Here is an excerpt from a late 19th century book by Robert Alison called *The Anecdote of Glasgow*: “The Rev. Dr. William Ritchie of St. Andrew's Church, Glasgow, was exceedingly fond of music, and had taught his church to admire both vocal and instrumental music combined. They determined, if possible, to secure an organ, to assist in aiding the praise in public worship, but were not allowed to do so by the Presbytery, which was of the ‘opinion that the use of organs in the public worship of God is contrary to the law of the land and constitution of our Established Church.’

“This did not, however, prevent Dr. Ritchie cultivating his favorite art. He loved the violin especially, and had both a big and a small one, which he frequently used. Though popular with his own congregation, who were devoted to him, and admired his ministrations, he was not so well liked by his brethren, who thought he acted an unministerial part by playing on the violin. In the year 1807 he was waited upon by a deputation of ministers, to advise him to give up his performances of these instruments on a Saturday night, that he might be the better prepared in spirit for the sacred duties of the Sabbath day. When they arrived, Dr. Ritchie asked them to come in, and he would let them hear one of his favorite tunes, and then they could judge for themselves whether such music was calculated to produce evil or good results.

“They consented to remain, and he begged them not to interrupt him in the performance till he was done, which would be, at most, in a few minutes. Taking the largest instrument into his hands, he played with care and feeling his own most favorite tune, the *Old Hundred*. The effect was marked. One of the chief divines was entranced, and could not refrain from saying — ‘Oh, 'tis a heavenly sound! please let us hear it again.’

“Dr. Ritchie, marking the favorable impression made, played several sacred pieces to the admiration of the deputation, some of whom declared themselves converts to the beneficial effect upon the mind of sweet sounds.”<sup>3</sup>

In our gospel story this morning, the Pharisees complain to Jesus about his disciples, “Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders?” Jesus quotes from the prophet Isaiah (“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far away from me.”). He then calls their beloved practices into question when he says, “Forsaking the commandment of God you hold fast to human tradition . . . You

well set aside the commandment of God, in order that you might make stand your tradition. . . You cancel the word of God by your tradition.” (Mark 7:8, 9, 13)

There are many discussions — even controversies and fights, what some call the “Worship Wars” — in churches these days. What style of worship will we offer? What kinds of instruments will we allow in the sanctuary? Who can use the church building and for what purposes? What traditions will we build on and what new things will we introduce? What traditions and symbols and ways of doing things have served their purpose and need to be retired? What traditions do we hold onto, even if we can’t remember the reason why the practice was started in the first place?

Bishop Peter Storey served for many years as a South African Methodist minister and was very involved in the anti-apartheid struggle and its aftermath. For seven years, he taught at the Duke Divinity School in Durham. When he returned to South Africa, he helped design and build a Methodist seminary and served as interim president. This distinguished and faithful servant of the Lord, with forty years of ministry, has said, “It is easier to do church than to be church.” That is so true — especially when it comes to traditions and customs and rituals and “the way we’ve always done it.”

When Jesus criticized the Pharisees and certain of the scribes “who had come from Jerusalem,” he didn’t tell them not to obey and follow God’s law. Instead, he criticized them for putting their own traditions and ways of doing things on a higher level than God’s law, and then using God’s law as a justification for what they wanted to do anyway. Jesus used a particular example based on the commandment “Honor your father and your mother.” By designating as a gift for God what could have been used to help one’s parent, Jesus said to the religious leaders, you actually go against the purpose of God’s law about honoring your parents. And yet, you puff yourselves up and claim that your traditions take priority.

In his commentary on this gospel story, Lamar Williamson says, “By emphasizing the secondary place of human traditions and the primary place of the commandment of God, this text calls us beyond arguments over what is old and what is new to a concern for what is vital.”<sup>4</sup> In that sense, Jesus is not condemning all traditions and rituals in the church, and neither should we. On the other hand, when we set **our** traditions, rites, and laws in stone and they end up getting in the way of our keeping God’s law, then we have a problem. When our traditions and “the way we’ve always done things” become sacred cows and quit being the best practices for helping us do what vital in the church, then we have a problem.

Last Sunday, the members of the Alternative Sunday School Class had an interesting discussion about Chapter 10 of N.T. Wright’s book, *small faith — GREAT GOD*. The chapter is called “Christian Hypocrites?” On a Monday morning years ago, our church secretary told me about the evangelist who had preached the night before at her church’s revival. He said people often say to him, “I don’t go to church because there are so many hypocrites there.” So he asks them, “Do you go to WalMart? There are lots of hypocrites there!”

Nobody likes to be called a hypocrite, with its implication of being two-faced and insincere. And yet, that's what Jesus called the religious leaders and church people who let their traditions and ways of doing things get in the way of doing what God really called them to do and to be as his people. In his chapter, N.T. Wright says, "We tithe the mint and dill and cumin — we may be scrupulously careful about how we spend Sunday, we may never go to the theater, we may have a regular quiet time, which we never miss, we may know how to dot the i's and cross the t's of the finer points of doctrine — and then when it comes to the weightier matters of the law, we fall flat on our faces — justice and love."<sup>5</sup>

The word "hypocrite" originated from the stage and theater, and referred to the role an actor or actress played. In light of this gospel story, in which Jesus chastises the religious folk for being hypocrites, he seems to be saying, "Don't play-act to obey God's law." As someone has said, Jesus doesn't want us to be actors of the word, but doers of the word.

The story is told about Mark Twain attending a church service after the minister, who was a friend of Twain's, had repeatedly urged him to come. The minister worked very hard on his sermon during the week, in anticipation of preaching before the great Mark Twain. However, as he preached, he couldn't help but notice that Mark Twain seemed to be completely unmoved, even uninterested, in his sermon.

After the service, Mark Twain told the minister, "I have a book at home with every word you preached this morning." The minister was quite upset and assured Mark Twain that he had worked hard on the sermon that week, that it was original, and that he had never preached it before. Still, Mark Twain claimed to have a book with every word the minister had preached. "I want to see this book," demanded the minister.

The next day the minister found a neatly wrapped package from Twain at his front door. When he opened the package, he found a dictionary. Inside the front cover, Mark Twain had written, "Words, just words, just words."<sup>6</sup>

Our congregation will mark its 131st anniversary in November. We have a long history of faithful service to our Lord Jesus Christ and this community. We also have 131 years of traditions and ways of doing things. Let us hope and pray that our traditions will always help us remember and do what is most vital. Let us hope and pray and act to be the church and not just do church.

***Let us pray: Lord Jesus, you bring people together to be your Body, your Church. Save us from everything false, distracting and enslaving. Heal us from legalism, prejudice, and short sightedness. Help us build communities instead of institutions. Empower us to make disciples instead of members. Cleanse us within so that everything that pours forth from our lips, hearts and hands is full of your grace and salvation. In your name we ask and pray so you alone may be glorified. Amen.***

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Janet H. Hunt, “Dancing with the Word” blog at [www.words.dancingwiththeword.com/2012/08/what-matters-and-what-doesnt\\_25.html](http://www.words.dancingwiththeword.com/2012/08/what-matters-and-what-doesnt_25.html)

<sup>2</sup>Found at [www.forums.insearchoftruth.org](http://www.forums.insearchoftruth.org)

<sup>3</sup>Robert Alison, *The Anecdote of Glasgow (1892)* found at [www.electricscotland.com](http://www.electricscotland.com).

<sup>4</sup>Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Luke* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), p. 136.

<sup>5</sup>N.T. Wright, *small faith, GREAT GOD* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), p. 95.

<sup>6</sup>Adapted from two different sources: Johan Cilliers, *The Living Voice of the Gospel: Revisiting the basic principles of preaching* (Stellenbosch, South Africa, 2004), p. 25 and Tim Snider, *All Things New: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Bloomington, IN: 2011), p. 93.