
The Heart of the Matter

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

A sermon preached at Page Auditorium on August 30, 2015 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

We follow all types of traditions. Families may have a tradition of eating dinner together every day and beginning that meal with a prayer of thanksgiving. Parents may have a tradition of reading to their children at bedtime. Maybe you have game nights or pizza nights or movie nights or Saturday morning breakfast traditions. When I was growing up, my family always ate lunch together after Sunday morning worship. Maybe date nights are an established tradition for you. Some have traditions for milestones—a mortgage burning party might be a tradition you follow (I can't wait for that one!). Taking photos of your children on the first day of school each year. Making a wish before you cut your birthday cake. Christmas day meals with family and friends or opening up your presents at specified time each year. Easter egg hunts. Watching football on Thanksgiving day. Watch Night services heading into a new year. There are all types of traditions.

Dear old Duke has its own traditions. For 20 plus years, Maya Angelou gave an opening address to all of the incoming first year students during orientation; it was a tradition until her death. At the end of baccalaureate services, every graduating senior can have a Bible, if they wish, given by the university; this has been done since 1924. During basketball season, there's the tenting tradition at K-ville and we even have some excited young couples who tent out on the quad to get first dibs on a date for their wedding in Duke Chapel. Every day at 5pm from the Chapel bell tower, you will hear the bells ringing—our very own Sam Hammond has been doing this for around 50 years. Traditions. They are endless, they vary, and they are passed on over time.

Tradition can sometimes get a bad rap. The word 'tradition' comes from the Latin *traditio*, a noun stemming from a verb that means 'to transmit, hand over, give for safekeeping.' It was originally used in Roman law to refer to legal transfers and inheritances. Tradition has to do with the ways we transmit beliefs or customs from generation to generation. In today's gospel story we have what is known as "the tradition of the elders," an oral tradition of rabbinic teaching that arose from the Jewish law, the Torah, and was handed down from generation to generation. The Pharisees adhere to this tradition by washing themselves or other items to ensure cleanliness. This was a matter of ceremonial purity and defilement not personal hygiene. The tradition of the elders showed people how to set themselves apart for God in the midst of foreign occupation. It was a serious religious matter but then the disciples come along and don't follow this tradition, which is why the Pharisees and scribes, the legal experts, ask Jesus, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" Maybe the disciples are following another tradition.

Traditions or tradition can have a constructive, positive impact. It can offer consistency and actually be stabilizing. It can provide a common practice, theory, or understanding within a community. A sense of a common life. A sense of history and values that have longevity such as "the tradition of the elders." It gives a perspective from the sages of the past, not burdening us with always having to create something new, but following our trusted forebears; there's a lineage of influence—whether it be religious or familial or institutional. Tradition can bring us into a larger network or narrative of the human story, showing us connections with the past. It can be very positive and fruitful to know that there have been those before us who have thought about this or

that and done this or that and we can learn from them. Even within theological education, we talk about tradition being a source for theological reflection along with scripture, reason, and experience; within the Methodist Church, this is known as the Wesleyan quadrilateral.

Yet tradition, though it has benefits, can easily turn stale if we enforce it as rigid and frigid dogma and it's no longer free enough to allow people to breathe. If followers of any tradition, say, "I can't breathe," then we know there's a problem. In a U.S. News & World Report interview (June 26, 1989) about his book, *The Vindication of Tradition*, esteemed and now deceased Yale professor, church historian, Lutheran pastor, Jaroslav Pelikan said: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. Tradition lives in conversation with the past, while remembering where we are and when we are and that it is we who have to decide. Traditionalism supposes that nothing should ever be done for the first time, so all that is needed to solve any problem is to arrive at the supposedly unanimous testimony of this homogenized tradition." When tradition becomes traditionalism we will die as Christians as our living, breathing faith suffocates.

This suggests that tradition may not always be positive. Religious traditions should ultimately facilitate a relationship, communion, with God. Tradition is not the relationship but a means to foster it. But there are times when our traditions lose their way and purpose. They may become about control and order rather than an expression of joy because it no longer does what it's supposed to do. Why say a prayer of confession or sing a hymn if it no longer leads us to God and just becomes a tiresome tradition? Jesus tells the Pharisees and scribes, "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." The tradition of the day was priority while God appeared to be placed on the backburner of their lives. Jesus wants to make sure that we never become trapped within any tradition, doing it because you were told to do it or always have done it this way or that way but don't know why you do it and for whom. In this way, religious tradition can lose its theological substance and become empty and hollow, or at least lack the holy. It becomes like a ship without a sail, detached from a firm foundation, distant from our hearts, our center, our spiritual core, causing our hearts to slowly die and rot away as the remnants of tradition float on without the life of God breathing into it. Jesus indicts the religious leaders by letting them know that though they reject God they still keep their tradition, making their own rules and making tradition do what they want it to do and not what it was supposed to do. The irony is, as Jesus says to them—you "void the word of God through your tradition that you handed on." The law that was meant to bring them into relationship with God is used to lead them away from God.

Tradition, at times, can even become tyrannical through a particular enforcement of uniformity. Those who are different and don't conform to traditional norms might be condemned because tradition can be presented as being about closure, cutting off the unclean from the clean, keeping people out rather than inviting them in. Tradition empty of hospitable love is a form of religious terrorism. How come they don't do it like Frank Sinatra, "my way"? Why don't they follow the tradition of the elders, the way we've always done it or known? Tradition can be used to shut out other traditions and how diverse people do things differently. Even to say "the tradition" should raise the questions, "Whose tradition? What tradition?" Your tradition isn't necessarily those of another but it doesn't make theirs inferior to yours just because it doesn't conform to your way of doing things.

Jesus takes it even further and brings us to the heart of the matter. When he answers the Pharisees and scribes, quoting Isaiah, he reveals how tradition can lose its heart. He's not a priest in this situation, he's a prophet. "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me...'" Tradition can look right from the outside but be totally wrong on the inside. Protestant reformer Martin Luther wrote about this

passage and noted, “The more earnest the superstitious are, the more mad they are in promising themselves God's favour because of their deeds.” We can become so obsessed with tradition as a means to God's blessing that we end up worshiping tradition and not the living God. We can actually abandon God while we hold on to traditions, and make our tradition god. This is why Jesus calls the religious figures, “play actors,” hypocrites, because their worship is only outward and not inward from the heart. There's an outward semblance of religion but with no heart, no living faith, no belief and trust in a living God who desires to win our hearts more than our traditions. There's always the danger that we use tradition in whatever form to avoid dealing with our hearts because searching our hearts is too scary as our hearts tell us who we really are. Sometimes we don't even want to know who we really are; we prefer our self created persona on Facebook. Thus, tradition can be an escape valve from our achy breaky hearts.

I'm not suggesting that this distortion of tradition is intentional. Sometimes we pass on things we never planned. We don't even realize it but it happens. Recently, there was an article on how Holocaust victims pass on the trauma of that past on to their progeny in their genes, what is known as epigenetic inheritance. A brutal past becomes a tradition genetically. It isn't intentional but it occurs anyway.

Sometimes we unknowingly pass on the idea that tradition itself is more important than the heart but Jesus cuts to the chase. He causes us to face the heart of the matter, that is, the heart itself, when he teaches that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile (i.e. all foods are clean) but what comes out of a person, from within, from the human heart, can defile. His teaching is revolutionary in that context and opens the way forward for his Gentile mission that would break the boundaries of cultural and religious separation. Jesus makes space to go beyond any tradition to get to the human heart, the common spiritual denominator among people. Traditions may be different but everyone has a heart and needs the love blood of God. Jesus embraces the inner life and reminds us not to ignore it, even in an academic setting, because the heart of Christian practice is the heart.

Poet and priest George Herbert would agree as evidenced in his poem, “The Altar.”

*A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant rears,
Made of a heart and cemented with tears;
Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
No workman's tool hath touch'd the same.
A HEART alone
Is such a stone,
As nothing but
Thy pow'r doth cut.
Wherefore each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame
To praise thy name.*

*That if I chance to hold my peace,
These stones to praise thee may not cease.
Oh, let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine,
And sanctify this ALTAR to be thine.*

God desires your heart to be an altar of sacrifice. God doesn't desire our traditions. God desires us. The heart in this gospel story is the seat of moral and religious conduct. The Semitic understanding of the heart is the center of human personality that determines actions and inaction; it involves the will. God calls us to have hearts close to God even though one person notes, "The human heart has, despite itself, a kind of genius for corruptibility, no matter what rituals or traditions we make for ourselves" (Rachel Mann).

So this brings me to a question to open the academic year—what is the state of your heart? Can you say like Mother Pollard during the civil rights movement, "My feet are tired but my soul is rested"? The outside reality may be one way but that doesn't mean your heart is the same way; only your heart knows the truth. We can't collapse our traditions with the state of our heart or our inner life. We can't confuse tradition with God because there's a distinction. Our liturgical tradition may be disrupted in Page but it doesn't have to disrupt the presence of God or your heart for God. God isn't disturbed by being in Page, God is disturbed if there is no room in your heart for God.

Jesus takes us to the heart of the matter. We may look on outside appearances but God looks on the heart. And so we pray, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." Jesus is clearly more interested in clean hearts than clean hands or food or well-manicured traditions. He wants us to know him more than knowing a tradition and we come to know Christ through our hearts and this is not something we necessarily see with the naked eye.

Quaker writer and educator Parker Palmer refers to "the unwritten history of the heart." What he means is—"The deeper movements that shape our world are impulses of the heart invisible to the eye: the hopes and greeds that move markets; the loves and hates that rouse armies; the desires to create or control that galvanize political power." The subtext of the script of your life is your heart. "For there is a boundary to looking... Work of the eyes is done, now go and do heart-work on all the images imprisoned within you" (Rainer Maria Rilke). Pay attention to your heart this year. Listen to it. Be guided by it. Give it to God for "out of the believer's heart will flow rivers of living water..." (John 7). May your heart be a canal or reservoir but never a swamp because swamps don't have an outlet.

Out of a believer's heart rivers flow. The daughter of Ethel Lance, one of the nine church members killed at Emmanuel AME church in Charleston this summer, was the first family member to speak at the bond hearing of Dylann Roof, the killer. She spoke softly to him: "I forgive you. You took something really precious away from me. I will never talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again. But I forgive you and have mercy on your soul. It hurts me, it hurts a lot of people but God forgive you and I forgive you." The tradition of the penal system in the U.S. may shout 'Kill him!' But the heart of God within says, 'forgive him.'

What is the state of your heart? If you had to give a state of your heart address, what would you say? This week write your own state of the heart address and share it with God and someone else because cultivation of the heart is just as important as cultivation of the mind.