
CARDIO AND CHRIST
MARK 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
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I know my sermon title may cause you to think that I'm going to speak about walking on a treadmill or jogging in the Duke Forest with Jesus by my side or that I'm going to start a new group called 'Christians for Cardio.' To be honest, there may be one of those groups out there already! In our day, cardio, short for cardiovascular exercise, is any activity that increases your heart rate and breathing. It can cause you to sweat and increase your blood flow. Cardio includes low-intensity activities like walking your dog. It includes moderate-intensity activities like brisk walking or Zumba. It includes high-intensity activities like running or kickboxing. There's been much written about the health benefits of cardio.

Even in the spiritual life, cardio is also important. Listen to what Jesus says in the gospel reading at two different times: "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me..." And then he also says, "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come..." Jesus gets right to the heart of the matter, literally—your heart. Christ engages our cardio. I say this because the Greek word for 'heart' is 'kardia' from where we get the word 'cardio' and cardiac and cardiology and cardiogram and so on.

'Kardia,' heart, is mentioned over eight hundred times in Scripture, but never referring to the literal physical pump that drives the blood. "Heart" is used figuratively in the Bible and refers to the affective center of our being and the capacity of moral preference, desire and choice. It is really who we are at our core. The Semitic understanding of the heart is the center of human personality that determines action and inaction and involves the will. So the human heart, in a biblical sense, is the heart of a life of faith with God. Your cardio condition matters to Christ. This is why St. Augustine in his classic text, *Confessions*, notes that our hearts are restless until they rest in God.

Our heart health, our cardio, can be so easily neglected amid what's been called the "deadly magic" of activity (Thurman). Henri Nouwen, in his book *The Way of the Heart*, wrote, "In general we are very busy people. We have many meetings to attend, many visits to make, many services to lead. Our calendars are filled with appointments, our days and weeks filled with engagements, and our years filled with plans and projects. There is seldom a period in which we do not know what to do, and we move through life in such a distracted way that we do not even take the time and rest to wonder if any of the things we think, say or do are worth thinking, saying, or doing. We simply go along with the many 'musts' and 'oughts' that have been handed on to us, and we live with them as if they were authentic translations of the Gospel of our Lord."

We simply go along with what has been handed on to us and in the process we forget our heart. In the gospel story, we hear about "the tradition of the elders," an oral tradition of rabbinic teaching that arose from the Jewish law, the Torah, and was handed on from generation to generation. Keep in mind that the word 'tradition' at its root means 'to transmit, hand over, give for safekeeping.' Tradition has to do with the ways we transmit beliefs or customs throughout time—the way we hand on. The Pharisees adhere to a tradition, the tradition of the elders, by washing themselves or other items to ensure cleanliness. This was a matter of ceremonial purity and defilement, not personal hygiene. It was a serious religious matter so when the disciples don't follow this tradition, it prompts their question to Jesus, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"

Before we lift up our nose at any tradition, we should acknowledge that we all come from traditions and are traditioned—whether it be religious, liturgical, familial, cultural, or institutional. Much of what we do and who we are and how we think has been handed on to us because no one is self-created. Every single denomination or

church is traditioned — from the robe-wearing, hymn-singing, organ-playing churches to the skinny-jeans wearing, praise-song singing, electric guitar band-blasting congregation. It is *all* tradition, handed on to us from the past.

Some families have a tradition of eating dinner together every evening and beginning that meal with a prayer of thanksgiving. While other families always name a new pet after a song or artist and then welcome that pet into their home by gathering in the living room and playing the music.

When I was growing up, my family always had a tradition to eat lunch together after the Sunday worship service and on every birthday, my mother would kiss my cheek the same number of times as my age. Other parents may have a tradition of reading to their children at bedtime. This time of year, according to Facebook and Instagram, taking photos of your children on the first day of school or of yourself on the first day of work is a popular tradition. Making a wish before you cut your birthday cake. Having Easter egg hunts. Watching NFL football on Thanksgiving Day. Traditions.

Duke has its own traditions too. Each year now, during orientation, the first-year students stand together on East Campus and are formed as a whole class (over 1700 this year) into the shape of their graduation year (e.g. 2028) while an aerial photo is taken. During basketball season, there's the famous tenting tradition at K-ville. Or, every day at 5pm from the Chapel bell tower, you will hear the carillon ringing. Traditions.

There is nothing inherently bad about tradition. It can provide consistency, stability, guidance, and structure. It can provide a sense of continuity with the past, a sense of being linked to a larger lineage. (Even coming to worship on Sunday mornings is a tradition! Don't stop that one!)

All tradition isn't bad. Problems arise, though, when we think of what former Yale professor Jarislov Pelikan once 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 our living, breathing, pulsating Christian faith—our cardio—will stop beating.

When tradition locks you in and up and becomes the law, it becomes traditionalism and demonstrates that tradition has lost its way and purpose. Jesus tells the Pharisees and scribes, "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition," "nullifying the word of God through your tradition that you handed on"(7:13). To Jesus, their oral tradition is alienated from the word of God, in this case, the law, the Torah, the primary means through which the people followed the way of God.

The problem is that a tradition meant to bring people into closer relationship with God leads them away from God and God's purposes in the world. New Testament scholar Brian Blount notes that Jesus' point in Mark is that "holding to ritual dietary traditions opposes God's intent to open the doors of God's rule to anyone who would choose to participate in it" like the Gentile Syrophenician woman and deaf man we meet in the stories after this scene. Tradition can keep people out, rather than invite them in, which is why Jesus says they are 'playacting' or pretending to obey God's law when really they're just following their own. They abandon God but keep tradition when Jesus creates a boundary-crossing space to go beyond any tradition in order to reach the human heart.

And even worse than this, tradition can become tyrannical, and routine, ruinous. What do I mean? Retired Duke Divinity professor Joel Marcus points out that the cognate verb for the word used to describe tradition (7:3,5,8,9,13) in our gospel story "signals not only the handing down of tradition, but also the handing over (or 'betrayal') of John the Baptist (1:14), Jesus (3:19, 9:31, 10:33, 14:10-11, 18-21, 41-42; 15:1, 10, 15) and Jesus' followers (13:9-12) because of their understanding of God's reign. The tradition by which the Pharisees live, in this case symbolized by ritual purity, becomes the mechanism through which the leaders of institutional Judaism terrorize Jesus, his followers and, later, Mark and his readers"(Brian Blount). Tradition, even religious ones, can kill you, rather than be the mechanism for life, breath, and blood to your heart.

But let me also add that “innovation can be the source of many stultifying traditions” as well (Lamar Williamson). Newer doesn’t necessarily mean better or holier. The real question is whether the tradition—however old or new—opens the door of your heart to encountering the heart of God. This is what Jesus is adamant about—your cardio, your spiritual heart health, because he knows that although your lips honor God every Sunday, your hearts can be far from God every other day of the week. So Jesus wants us to win from within.

We can faithfully follow tradition and yet be hollow on the inside. How do you nurture what is within? In other words, does tradition foster communion (with God and one another) or hurt our heart health?

The emphasis of Jesus in this story is not on what you eat, but how you live. Not just on what we do but who we are at our core—in the heart. It really is a call, a reminder at the start of another academic year, not to neglect the inner life, not to disregard what has been called “the inward sea” (Thurman), but to cultivate the spiritual health of your heart. Our cardio matters to Christ. This is why he stresses it.

This is why the Psalmist prays, “Create in me a clean *heart*, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”

This is why 17th century poet and priest George Herbert wrote his poem, “The Altar.”

*A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant rears,
Made of a heart and cemented with tears...
Oh, let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine,
And sanctify this ALTAR to be thine.*

God desires your heart to be an altar. God doesn’t desire our traditions, no matter how beautiful or meaningful they may be. God desires you.

So we say with the hymn writers from the Christian tradition:

*Take my will and make it thine;
it shall be no longer mine.
Take my heart it is thine own;
it shall be thy royal throne,*

*O to grace how great a debtor
daily I’m constrained to be!
Let that grace now, like a fetter,
bind my wandering heart to thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
prone to leave the God I love;
here’s my heart, O take and seal it;
seal it for thy courts above.*

Christ cares about our cardio. The heart of a living Christian faith is the heart. Give Christ your heart and make it a home for God this year, because remember as we are told in the scriptures, we may look on outward appearances (even of traditions), but the Lord looks on the heart (1 Sam 16:8).