

When Tradition Gets in the Way – Mark 7:24-37
September 9, 2018

Please pray with me. Holy God, whose spirit comes to us in moments of both strength and weakness, come now into our midst that we might be able to hear your Word in fullness and in truth, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Did it ever strike you as strange that Jesus, the kind loving Savior we know, would call a woman and a child “dogs?” This was one of those Bible passages I could never understand until I led a woman’s Bible study as a seminary intern and had to exegete this passage – in other words take it apart as you might have outlined sentences in English class at one time.

What Jesus is saying, in language the Syrophoenician woman would have understood, but we don’t is that his mission was to the Jewish community first and then later to the Gentiles. The woman, whose name like many other women in the Bible, we are never told, understands enough to press him for just the crumbs left over – “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Jesus relents and heals the daughter – and strangely enough – or maybe not - he knows from afar that the daughter is healed.

This woman is not letting traditions get in her way – she is the equivalent of today’s “Grizzly Mom” determined to help her daughter. This is like a homeless person interrupting a dinner party of famous people to ask a favor. She is a woman – not supposed to talk with a man, but rather let her man do it for her, but perhaps she doesn’t have a man. In addition, she is a Gentile – an unclean person – speaking to a Jew. She has nothing going for her, but miraculously, Jesus, ever the compassionate one, comes through and heals her daughter.

Theologically there are three points illustrated here as set forth in *Feasting on the Word* by commentator, Loye Bradley Ashton. “First, the power of faith knows no religiously demarcated boundaries.” In other words, if you have faith it doesn’t matter if you are Jew or Gentile. “Second, as God’s Anointed, Jesus is usually not understood and accepted in his true role by those closest to him, read “the disciples,” but instead by those who truly have faith, even if they do not possess birthright membership in the covenant community.” Third, “Jesus’ messianic mission was always meant by God to go beyond the chosen people in order to fulfill God’s unlimited power of redemption.” Mark is not so subtly stating that the kingdom of God transcends and nullifies any claims of the Roman Empire to being truly universal.

We might say that tradition has always been the backbone if you will of the Jewish faith and for them it is a good thing because they have been so persecuted over the years that their traditions give them something to hang onto. In “Fiddler on the Roof,” Tevye the dairyman who is always carrying on lengthy conversations with God, tells the audience, “You may ask, why do we stay up here if it’s so dangerous? We stay because Anatevka is our home. And How do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in one word – tradition!Here in Anatevka we have traditions for everything-how to eat, how to sleep, how to wear clothes. For instance, we always keep our heads covered and always wear a prayer shawl. This shows our constant devotion to God.” Nobody knows how the traditions started, but because of them everyone knows who he is and what God expects him to do.

Tradition is not so good however when it interferes with love. In “Fiddler on the Roof,” tradition causes Tevye, a good man, to turn out his daughter Chava because she married outside the faith. Now, I understand the need for compatible marriages and the necessity of preserving the faith and keeping the family together. From ancient times the Jews forbade intermarriage because it is all too easy to take a spouse and then assume that spouse’s faith, or no faith at all. Intermarriage has cost Jews (and Catholics and Protestants) many members who, when they marry outside the faith end up with no faith at all. It was still so tragic to see Tevye announce to his wife Golde that their daughter Chava is “now dead to us.” Tevye says if he bends that far he will break. As I was writing this I couldn’t help but think of a more modern example. Think of the parents and grandparents who are very much opposed to the gay lifestyle, but when a child or grandchild announces they are gay – most have second thoughts and embrace the child no matter what. Sometimes they hold fast to their beliefs, but most often they bend. I have seen the same thing with young people who live together before marriage and even have children out of wedlock. It was not so many years ago that either of these lifestyles were absolutely forbidden. I am not condoning nor condemning either, but simply tying the thoughts together – yesterday and today.

In our scripture lesson today, tradition gets in the way of the Pharisees. Most of us know that in the Gospels Jesus was always getting into arguments with the Pharisees and from that we might get the erroneous impression that the Pharisees were bad people. But they weren’t, they were very, very, very good people, but the problem was that they knew it. They had all these commandments from God

that they insisted be followed. They would say with Tevye, “Because of our traditions, everyone knows who he is and what God expects him to do.” That was a good thing, but then, people got lost in the process. Jesus upended tradition by putting people first. For Jesus, people always came before laws and we see a good deal of that in the Gospels. He healed people on the Sabbath, he ate with prostitutes and tax collectors, he was compassionate with people if not with the Pharisees.

Tradition comes from the Latin *traditio*, “handing over.” We are here today because God handed over Jesus to walk among us and to die on the cross for us. We are here today because our forefathers handed over down through the years, the faith and the traditions we share and observe today. Yes, tradition can be a good thing, but it can also get in the way. We talked a little about this last week – about how tradition can get in the way of the church growing and moving forward. Does anyone remember the famous “Seven Last Words of the Church”? They are “We’ve never done it that way before!” Now, that is preserving tradition big time!! I am sorry, but I still, nearly four years later, chuckle every time I think about how I just automatically assumed the lunch at the annual meeting was a potluck. I don’t know if you would say “We’ve never done it that way before!” but certainly not in a few years and you weren’t planning to do it then. I almost think it was the next year when someone finally told me what I had done so maybe that is how you most easily break tradition. By assuming!! At any rate, years from now folks like Reagan and Gage, will be worshipping at Tory Hill Meetinghouse because we “handed over the faith” to them. Amen.