

A Rabbi and a Roman Catholic Priest were sitting next to each other at an Inter-faith event. When dinner was served it seemed as though someone had accidentally placed a slab of ham on the Rabbi's plate. The Rabbi did not protest but simply proceeded to eat other things on the plate that his faith permitted.

At one point during the meal the Priest leaned over in the direction of the Rabbi and said. "Rabbi Cohen, you and I both know that the dietary laws from the Old Testament were developed at a time when pork was indeed dangerous to eat due to lack of refrigeration and low heat in cooking. Because of this, trichinosis was rampant and your ancestors in the faith were right to prohibit the eating of pork in order to save the lives of many Israelites. But those days are gone, however, pork is safe to eat, and there is no reason to cling to outdated ancient practices. When will you finally eat your first mouthful of ham, Rabbi Cohen?" The Rabbi paused briefly and then responded, "At your wedding, Father Maguire, at your wedding"

Like the Priest in this funny little story there may be times in our lives when we find ourselves criticizing others on certain traditions that they follow, especially when we don't understand them, or when we don't follow them ourselves. In Seminary I remembering attending an Assembly of God church for one of my classes, and I recall how easy it was for me to feel uncomfortable and to disapprove of the altar Calls and the speaking in tongues that I encountered during worship! Even worse than this behavior of critiquing others for their traditions, is when we condemn them for not following religious practices, or expectations, that we believe are important to us!

Perhaps we came to church one morning and were irritated when we found a stranger sitting in our pew! Maybe we have scolded someone for wearing a hat, or other piece of clothing that we felt was inappropriate, during worship. Maybe we believe that children should be seen, but not heard when they are at church. Often

times we can be quick to criticize others for not abiding by our traditions. Or like the Pharisees in our Gospel story for today we may condemn others for not observing certain religious practices, without trying to understand why they are important to us, or why we do them in the first place.

From the moment Jesus began his ministry it was not unusual for the religious leaders of his day to follow him, waiting for him to make a mistake so they could criticize him for it. I'm sure we can come up with countless examples of this! The scribes complain when Jesus heals a paralytic man because he offers a forgiveness they believe could only come from God! They are disturbed that one of their own, a Jewish Rabbi would eat with tax collectors and sinners! In the eyes of the religious leaders Jesus and his disciples were always making mistakes! They didn't fast when they were supposed to fast, they picked grain to eat during the Sabbath, touched people who were considered unclean, and even healed men and women at the wrong times!

In contrast to the crowds who come to Jesus to be helped in some way, the Pharisees in our story come to him in order to criticize the eating habits of His disciples! They accuse his students of failing to practice the Jewish ceremonial hand washing, a tradition of the elders, which they regarded as having equal authority with the written law. Unsurprisingly, it never occurred to them that those washings had nothing to do with personal hygiene, nor were they commanded in the Law. The religious leaders failed to consider the possibility that they were taking a Levitical rite that was originally used for temple worship and were applying it to all Jews. And yet, as we explore this story in greater detail, perhaps we might begin to understand some of the motivations behind their criticism!

Purity practices like hand washing, for example, formed a group boundary. They defined who was in and who was out! Whenever the Jews practiced these washings, they declared that they were "special", and that other people were "not!"

In the eyes of the Pharisees, you needed to not only follow the law, but there were certain qualifications for receiving God's grace! Had they forgotten, or did they not understand that like the love he has for all people, God's grace is unconditional.

I often think that like the Pharisees we too get caught up in what we should do, or not do, as Christians. We shouldn't swear, we shouldn't drink, we shouldn't gamble, we shouldn't lie! But we should honor our parents, give money to the poor, and read our Bibles more! Like the Pharisees we cling to practices or ideas instead of focusing on God's grace, while lifting it up to others and taking the time to examine the reason behind our actions!

Now, not only did their outlook on tradition indicate the wrong attitude toward people, but it also conveyed a wrong idea of the nature of sin and personal holiness! Jesus makes it clear in his response to their criticism that true holiness is a matter of inward thought and affection; it is not just about outward actions! He provided an example of this in his Sermon on the Mount when he declared that it is a sin to murder or commit adultery, but it is also a sin to harbor murderous or lustful thoughts in one's heart.

In our story this morning Jesus points out to the Pharisees that actions that flow out of a "heart close to God" whether traditional or novel are good! Actions that flow out of a heart far from God, whether traditional or novel, are bad! Instead of answering the religious leaders' criticism with a question, as Jesus often does in scripture, he points out that they are hypocrites! They are pretenders, actors, imposters, they act differently than what they truly are!

The religious leaders pretend to care about God and his Word, but really, they only care about themselves! While quoting Isaiah Jesus declares that their religious worship was practiced in vain because true worship must come from the heart, and it must be directed by God's truth, not man's personal ideas! In other words, he knew that they were just going through the motions.

Jesus teaches us that traditional practices are not necessarily good or bad, but we need to understand why we do them. For instance, making the sign of the cross does not make one a good Christian. However, if one's faith is strengthened and renewed by this symbolic reference, then by all means follow that tradition. The problem lies in the relationship one has to tradition, either abandoning it or keeping it, and the source of the tradition, is it from God or from humans!

One could argue that it can be difficult to understand sin as a common, human, natural state. Jesus says that it comes from within. It is part of our nature! Sin is not just doing "bad things." It is not outside things like drugs, or alcohol, that make a person bad, it is all the garbage inside of us! According to Jesus, the human heart is sinful and produces all manner of evil desires, thoughts, and actions, everything from murder to envy. Until people are convinced that their "insides" are the problem, they will not seek the proper cure!

When we realize that one's "insides" are at the heart of the problem, and that no cure can be found within, then one needs to be cured by a power outside of oneself, a power that can change the insides. Remember a few weeks ago I preached that we are to ingest Jesus, we are called as his disciples to get to know him, to bring him into our hearts! Our salvation has come from outside of us!

It is God, who is outside of our defiled and defiling insides, who comes into us in Word and Sacrament. It is God, who comes into us through our ears as we listen to scripture, through our mouths, as we devour the bread and wine, and even through our hands and feet as we go out into the world to serve him. Simply stated, the cure for our inner sin is Jesus, and the forgiveness he brought while destroying the consequence of sin through his death on the cross!

I firmly believe that we can learn a valuable lesson from the Pharisees in our story! They were "playactors," whose religious customs were practiced in vain. We need to take a hard look at our traditions and why we do the things we do! I

would like to share with you a story that demonstrates how performing all the right actions isn't quite enough if we don't know why we do them!

A young man once came to a great rabbi and asked if he could be his student. It was wintertime then. The rabbi stood at the window looking out upon the yard while the rabbinical candidate was droning into his ears a glowing account of his piety and learning.

The young man said, "You see, Rabbi, I always go dressed in spotless white like the sages of old. I never drink any alcoholic beverages; only water ever passes my lips. Also, I live a plain and simple life. I have sharp-edged nails inside my shoes to mortify me. Even in the coldest weather, I lie naked in the snow to torment my flesh. Also daily, I receive forty lashes on my bare back to complete my perpetual penance."

As the young man spoke, a white horse was led into the yard to the water trough. It drank, and then it rolled in the snow, as horses sometimes do. "Just look!" cried the rabbi. "That animal, too, is dressed in white. It also drinks nothing but water, has nails in its shoes and rolls naked in the snow. Also, rest assured, it gets its daily ration of forty lashes on the rump from its master. Now, I ask you, is it a saint, or is it a horse!"

Like the hopeful student in this illustration, do we come to worship God because we have always done so, because it is part of our nature, or do we do it in response to what God has done for us? Do we criticize others for following certain religious traditions like the Priest in my earlier joke, or do we get upset when they won't follow our own? After all, human nature is prone to hold on to worn-out **man-made** traditions, and to ignore or disobey the living Word of God. Sure, it is true that some traditions are helpful as reminders of our rich heritage, or to bind together generations, but we must constantly be aware lest tradition take the place of truth!

Through their actions the Pharisees destroyed not only their character, but they also destroyed the influence and authority of the very Word of God, that they claimed to be defending. “I wonder sometimes if we are any better.” After all, if we claim to be Christian and we worship God but don’t feel a need to go beyond our rituals or traditions to take actions that matter, then aren’t we destroying the influence of God’s word as well? Thankfully we are offered grace through Jesus words as we remember that true holiness is a matter of the heart, of having a right relationship with God by faith.

It’s not so important what we say or do, but what we have inside us for God and for others. Truth be told, if we don’t have a love in our hearts for God and for each other, then as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, we are like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. As Jesus reminds us in today’s Gospel, God wants our love and obedience to come from our hearts rather than by any type of outward obedience to rules. And Thanks be to God for that! AMEN