

*Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.” He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, Honor your father and your mother, and, Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If anyone tells his father or his mother, “What you would have gained from me is given to God,” he need not honor his father.’ So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: “‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’”*

*And he called the people to him and said to them, “Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.” Then the disciples came and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?” He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.” But Peter said to him, “Explain the parable to us.” And he said, “Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.”*

Matthew 15:1-20

Well, we are one week away from celebrating Thanksgiving in Canada, which was declared to be an official legal holiday in 1957 - and we are eight weeks away the celebration of Thanksgiving in the United States, which was declared to be a nationwide holiday by President Lincoln in 1863 and was officially made a legal holiday in 1941. Canadians see their first thanksgiving observed by Europeans in North America held by Sir Martin Frobisher and his crew in the Eastern Arctic in 1578. They ate a meal of salt beef, biscuits and mushy peas to celebrate and give thanks for their safe arrival in Newfoundland – and the United States see their first Thanksgiving observed by the Pilgrims after their first fall harvest at Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts - eating a meal of goose, ducks, venison, ham, lobster, clams, berries, fruit, pumpkin, and squash in October 1621. While each country does celebrate Thanksgiving – they do so on different dates and in different ways, according to different traditions.

Our family tradition on Thanksgiving back home in Minnesota and Wisconsin revolved around deer hunting, as the season always opened on the Saturday before Thanksgiving, which is always on the third Thursday of November – and so regardless of how successful you might have been hunting deer during the week, on Thanksgiving you still get up early and grab your gun and head out into the woods and spend the morning enjoying God’s creation – and then head back home to take a shower and join the rest of the family eating enough food to last you two days, and then sit down and watch a football game. That tradition has changed dramatically for us since we’ve been in Port Alberni because our lives and our family and our priorities have changed.

The Oxford Dictionary of English defines tradition as “a long-established custom or belief that has been passed on from one generation to another.” But the reality of life is that our lives and our families and our priorities do change – which means our customs and beliefs will change too. Traditions, in and of themselves, aren't bad things. Traditions can be highly significant helpful ways to keep things together in life. Traditions represent a critical piece of our culture. They help form the structure and foundation of our families and our society – and contribute to giving us a sense of comfort and belonging. But there is also a downside to traditions. Because the culture and the world and our lives are not static but are in constant flux of changing, adapting and reforming – traditions can become barriers to growing, moving ahead and making progress. Customs, rituals and traditions can keep us from being what God created us to be and do what God calls us to do. This is the issue Jesus addresses in our text for this morning.

As we step into Matthew 15, we do so in the context of Matthew 14 where we saw Jesus, in an atmosphere of rejection and opposition, started to withdraw from teaching, peaching and healing - and began to head towards Jerusalem where he would fulfill his purpose on a cross at Calvary. In that same chapter we read of John the Baptist being put to death, and of Jesus' miracle of feeding the thousands of hungry people, and of his miracle of calming a raging storm in the sea, and of Jesus' healing many who were sick in the land of Gennesaret. And while Jesus and his disciples in Gennesaret we read: "*Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat"*" (Matthew 15:1-2).

This was not chance meeting between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees. In Matthew 12 we read that they been conspiring on how they might destroy Jesus ever since he had healed the man with the withered hand while in the synagogue on a Sabbath day. They have not done this directly yet because the people still looked upon Jesus with favor. But that would not stop them from following Jesus around and seeking to discredit him in order to destroy him. The text seems to indicate that that was the purpose of their visit – and it would seem that they finally found something that would do so. Their question to him was not for the purpose of learning something from Jesus, but of exposing his violation of their traditions and thus having a reason to criticize and condemn him. Note that in scrutinizing the manner in which Jesus' disciples were eating, they do not attack Jesus for the manner in which he was eating, but rather it is about His disciples. The underlying accusation here is that Jesus was not teaching his disciples the proper traditions and he let them get away with eating without washing their hands.

Now trying to discredit someone because they didn't teach others to wash their hands seems to a bit of a stretch. For most of us, it is preferable to have clean hands before we eat. It is better hygiene and it helps check the spread of sicknesses. However, in our society, if someone eats with dirty hands, we just consider the person to be ignorant or messy and we then consider it to be their problem. We would only be concerned if they were the ones serving our food. However, the Jews saw this much different light. For them it was not a matter of personal hygiene, but a matter of religious tradition tied directly to spiritual cleansing. The Law of Moses had many ceremonies that were designed to remind the people of their desperate need for God. Some ceremonies involved things that signified that they were set apart to God and they were required to be separated from anything that was ceremonially unclean.

Judaism was supposed to be a religion of the heart, but the traditions of the Rabbis, built up over many centuries, changed it into an intentionally external and shallow religion that could be ritually practiced outwardly with great enthusiasm and loyalty regardless of the condition of the heart. The issue of washing hands was a matter of ceremonial cleansing that was of great importance according to the "*tradition of the elders.*" The hand washing ceremony itself required you to pour water on your left hand, palm up, letting the water run down your arm and drip off your elbow. If it didn't drip off your elbow your hand was not clean, and you had to do it all over again. But once it does drop off the elbow, do the same with your palm facing down - and when finished, do the same with your right hand. A truly devoted Jew would do this, not only before a meal, but also between each of the meal's courses.

One Rabbi taught that "whosoever has his abode in the land of Israel and eats his common food with rinsed hands may rest assured that he shall obtain eternal life." It was also taught that it was better to walk miles to get water than to eat with unwashed hands. Some rabbis even taught that a demon would attach itself to people's unwashed hands while they slept, and that if they had not washed their hands according to the ritual, the demon would enter into the person through the food the person touched with his unwashed hands. In the teachings of hand washing water became more important for washing hands than for drinking; a devoted Jew would rather die than violate tradition. Notice the scribes and Pharisees do not say "according to the Law of Moses" because the Law of Moses does not teach what they taught. Ultimately the "*traditions of the elders*" replaced the Scriptures themselves in importance. This is why Jesus responds to their questioning him with his question about the truth of their traditions.

*“He answered them, ‘And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If anyone tells his father or his mother, ‘What you would have gained from me is given to God, he need not honor his father.’ So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God.”* (Matthew 15:3-6). In these words, Jesus does not deny that his disciples were breaking the tradition of the elders regarding washing their hands before eating. But rather he answers their question with his own question, which in actuality is a stern rebuke of their hypocrisy in criticizing his disciples for breaking a *“tradition of the elders”* when they are doing something much worse in transgressing the commandments of God. We see a more detailed record of Jesus’ stern rebuke in the gospel of Mark.

*And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, “‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.” And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, Honor your father and your mother’; and, Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (that is, given to God)— then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.”* Mark 7:6-13.

Jesus rebukes the scribes and Pharisees by condemning them with the same condemnation of Jerusalem by the prophet Isaiah and then he gives them a specific example of their sin. He calls them *“hypocrites”* which in the original Greek was a term used for *stage actors wore masks to play their characters*. This which was exactly what God’s people were doing in a spiritual sense 700 years beforehand and this was God’s condemnation of those in Jerusalem through the prophet Isaiah. They were people who pretended to be something spiritually they were not. Their worship of God was vain because it was just lip service. They made worship into a ritual in which they said the right things but their hearts were far away from God – *a fact that was demonstrated by their replacement of the truth of God with the traditions of men*. This is still a common problem today even among many who profess to be followers of Jesus.

Jesus rebuked them for how deceitfully they were very able at declaring the commandments of God to be invalid in order to keep their traditions and he gave them a very specific example. The commandment to honor your father and mother is the fifth listed in the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:12. It is repeated in a positive manner in various ways throughout both the Old and New Testaments. It is also stated from the negative view point in both Exodus 21:7 and Leviticus 20:9 and that any child that failed to honor his or her parents was to be stoned to death. Yet this very clear command of God was overturned by the traditions of the elders through the practice known as *“Corban.”*

*“Corban”* a given name meaning a blessing from God dedicated back to God. Corban allowed a person to dedicate whatever they wanted to God - but who is also able to continue to personally use what they dedicated to God as long as they want. This was a deceitful way to pretend to be pious without giving up what was dedicated and a handy way to restrict the use of items to just yourself. Though the dedicated items had never actually been given to God, the fact that they were dedicated to God restricted them from being used for the benefit of others. Corban allowed a person to refuse to honor his parents by supporting them in their old age, yet continue to have the personal benefit of whatever might have been lost in supporting their parents and still be considered very devote. It would be like if your parents were poor and in need of a car and you had two cars but wanted to keep them both for yourself. Corban allowed you to dedicate one or both cars to the church, and get an income tax receipt as an offering to God from the church. But you, not the church, would still physically have the cars - and you could restrict the use of the cars just to yourself. What was Corban was given in name - *but not really*. In regards to parental care, the Word of God was invalidated by the use of Corban by the *“tradition of the elders.”* Jesus said: *“So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God”* (Matthew 15:6).

If we refuse to evaluate traditions on the basis of the authority of God's word - if we hold our religious traditions, our cultural customs, our ways and our beliefs regarding how the church is to function to be *too sacred to be examined* - then we're trusting in tradition more than we are on the truth of God's word. There is a danger of hypocritically resting on religious traditions, on cultural customs, on ways and beliefs regarding how the church is to function - *in that they can become a substitute for a true relationship with God*. Jesus warned us of this in Matthew 7:21-23: "*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'*" Our traditions, our cultural customs, our ways and beliefs regarding how the church is to function - can deceive us into thinking we are genuinely close to God.

And not only do those things give us a false sense of relationship with God, but they also give us a false experience of "*worship*." These things can fool us into thinking that we're worshipping God, and that He is somehow pleased our traditions, our cultural customs, our ways and beliefs regarding how the church is to function. In our text Jesus declared: "*You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men'*" (Matthew 15:7-9). The worship of God makes everything we do sacred and so everything else must reflect our worship of our most Holy God who makes all things sacred. The types of music, the types of worship services, the times when the service starts and ends, the length of the sermon, the prayers, the order of the service, and all the things in a worship service can vary vastly - *if they bring our hearts and minds to focus on the Lord Jesus Christ*.

But if we are just going through the motions, then no matter how good the music, the prayers and the preaching may be, even by biblical standards, we have not given reverence to God and our worship of Him is in vain. And if in any way, in anything we do in our worship services, is done in a way that highlights or focuses or promotes or exalts people over God - or if our religious traditions or our cultural customs, or our ways and our beliefs regarding how the church is to function over God - our worship is in vain! Everything we do at Arrowsmith in Sunday morning worship is subject to the truth of the Word of God, and must be predominantly focused on God - and on the cross, and on the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. And if by God's grace, if anything that does not match the Scriptures or focus on God and the cross and Jesus, it should be thrown out or changed to match God, the cross and Jesus.

Religious traditions, cultural customs, our ways and our beliefs regarding how the church is to function, in and of themselves, aren't bad things in themselves. All of these can be significant helpful ways to keep things together in life – but they all can also become “transgressions” when they cause us to set aside the clear commands of God's Word, and when they give us a false sense of our relationship with God, and when they give us a false experience of worshipping God. Of this Pastor and Bible scholar Warren Wiersbe writes: “Tradition is something external, while God's truth is internal, in the heart. People obey tradition to please men and gain status, but we obey the Word to please God. Tradition deals with ritual, while God's truth deals with reality. Tradition brings empty words to the lips, but truth penetrates the heart and changes the life. Actually, tradition robs a person of the power of the Word of God. And unfortunately, there are many “evangelical traditions” in churches today, man-made teachings that are often considered as authoritative as the Word of God - even though they contradict His Word. By obeying these traditions, Christians rob themselves of the power of God's Word.”

Jesus knew this. It's the reason he did not give a direct answer to the religious leaders about their question regarding eating with unwashed hands *because they deserved a strong rebuke* for their hypocrisy and disobedience to God's commands. And after he had done so, Jesus then turned his attention to the crowd that was following them and spoke to them also, to make sure that they understood his point and why washing before eating was not necessary to be clean before God.

*And he called the people to him and said to them, "Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person." Then the disciples came and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?" He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit." But Peter said to him, "Explain the parable to us." And he said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone."*

Matthew 15:14-20

Jesus response regarding the tradition of ceremonial cleansing was to speak of the nature of true cleanliness. He begins by saying it's not what goes into us that makes us clean, but what comes out of us. What goes into our mouth, he said, will go to the stomach and eventually pass out of the body. But the things which come out of the mouth, come from the heart - and it is this that makes us "*unclean*." True cleanliness does not work its way from the outside of us into our hearts, it works its way from our hearts to the outside. Good behavior does not make us good. Good behavior can be externally imposed by a set of laws that demand and reward right behavior, and punish bad behavior. But this does not produce true goodness. True goodness originates from a cleansed and changed heart, which is then able to express itself in right (righteous) behavior. However, the clean heart comes only from a work of God within us. Good behavior is a symptom of true goodness, not the cause of it. If a system of rewards and punishment for behavior is strong enough, it will induce conformity to the expected behavior pattern, and the behavior will appear good enough - but it is still not the true goodness of God. In Mark 10:18 Jesus said, "*No one is good by God alone*." True goodness, spiritual cleanliness, comes from God alone.

It is highly significant that "*the Pharisees were offended*" by what Jesus said – and that Jesus told his disciples and the crowd to, "*Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit*." The Jewish Pharisees and Sadducees and scribes of the day claimed the role of showing the ignorant masses the way to God. But the truth was they were actually blind themselves, and *a blind man that claims he can see, cannot be helped*. They were hypocrites as proven by the fact that they were offended by the truth of God's Word. People who love the light delight in correction so that they may live in the light. But those who love the darkness of their own understanding are offended at any exposure. Jesus' words here are words of caution for us today. We must take care about who we listen to and what we read. There are still many spiritually blind teachers proclaiming to know the true way to God, but it is not the way of the Word of God - even though they claim to be born-again followers of Jesus. In their blindness the blind guides of our day lead others into the darkness of religious traditions, cultural customs, and our ways and our beliefs regarding how the church is to function - that are rooted in the entitlement-minded, social-conscious, human-moralized, therapeutic yearnings of our day – rather than the truth-soaked Word of God that is focused on God, the cross and the risen Jesus Christ.

It is highly significant that the apostle Peter struggled to understand what Jesus was saying, most likely because he was very tied into the ceremonial traditions himself. Even years after Pentecost, Peter still had trouble accepting the idea that all foods were clean if they were eaten with thanksgiving. It took a visitation from an angel in a vision in Acts 10:14 and then years later a rebuke from the apostle Paul in Galatians 2:11-12 to get it through his head. Yet we find Peter doing all he can to try to understand. We need to do the same. We need ask God to reveal to us what customs, rituals and traditions are keeping us from being what God created us to be and do what God calls us to do. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to point out which of our religious traditions, our cultural customs, our ways and our beliefs regarding how the church is to function according to our preferences, our opinions and our wills – that we deem to be too sacred be examined under the divine light and authority of God's word. We need to ask Jesus to help us to fulfill the tradition of denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following him.

The Pharisees and scribes were wrong. It was not what a man ate that defiled him, for anything he eats will eventually pass through his body. It is the things that come out of his mouth, for what he says that will reveal his heart, and sin does not originate outside the body, but in the inner being of the person: *“For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.”* In Titus 1:15-16 the apostle Paul writes: *“To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.”* We are “defiled” because we have unwashed hearts, not because we have unwashed hands - and the traditions, customs, beliefs of fallen humanity can never wash the heart. The heart can only be cleansed through the blood of the cross of our crucified and risen Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit when we confess our sins and surrender our hearts and lives to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

A few years ago a police officer pulled over the car of an elderly man who was travelling significantly over the speed limit. The man explained that he was rushing his wife to the hospital because she was having a heart attack. The officer ignored the man’s excuse and instead aggressively lectured the man, telling him that he shouldn’t speed no matter what. Despite the man’s pleas for the officer to escort him and his dying wife to the hospital, the officer ignored him and proceeded to write him a ticket, which took 10 minutes – and then they proceeded to the hospital, where the man’s wife died shortly after. We are left with the question: “What if the police officer had been more concerned for life than the law?”

This is what Jesus is getting at in Scripture this morning. He is telling us that life with him is not about the rules that we do or don’t follow - whether it’s not washing our hands or speeding to save a life or something in our lives we hold to be more sacred than the truth of the Word of God. Or as Jesus said it: *“What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.”* In one sense God doesn’t sweat the small stuff. He doesn’t chalk up how many times we messed up and He’s not keeping score of things we’ve done right. God wants more than our hands; He wants hearts devoted to Him. It would be good for us to remember this. Like the police officer in the story we can get too hung up on the things that really don’t matter. We can get trapped by our own little rules or the rules of others or the rules we have for others by *worshipping our sacred opinion*. We then end up completely blind to a life that is real and full of joy. Worse yet, we could be leading others away from Jesus instead towards Him.

Unfortunately this often happens in the church. But I pray we would be a people of God who refuse to follow religious traditions or cultural customs or our ways and our beliefs regarding how the church is to function – but rather follow the sacred tradition of humbly and joyfully living out the truth of the Word of God, focusing our hearts on God and on the cross, and on the crucified and risen Jesus Christ!

*“Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near;  
let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts;  
let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him,  
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.  
For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

*“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

*“For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you  
shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.  
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;  
and it shall make a name for the Lord, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”* Isaiah 55:6-13

