

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

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

Deut. 4:1-2,6-9

Psalm 15

James 1:17-27

August 29, 2021

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

There's a story about a guru and a cat that goes like this...

"When the guru sat down to worship each evening, the ashram cat would get in the way and distract the worshipers. So he ordered that the cat be tied during evening worship. After the guru died the cat continued to be tied during evening worship. And when the cat died, another cat was brought to the ashram so that it could be duly tied during evening worship. Centuries later learned treatises were written by the guru's disciples on the religious and liturgical significance of tying up a cat while worship is performed."¹

The cat, in this particular story, was a small distraction that needed a solution. In response, the guru came up with a way to contain the cat so that worship could continue uninterrupted. It seemed simple enough. But, the real dilemma in this story began after the cat died. The people had gotten so used to the cat being there that they couldn't recall why it was tied in the first place. All they knew was that when they worshipped, the cat was tied. Upon the cat's death, the people tried to keep up the tradition of this "worship practice" they had come to rely on. So, they found another cat and tied it up. And, with that they continued what was now considered to be the "right" way to worship.

This story made me wonder...what are our ashram cats?

Well...I started a list and maybe you can add to it...

- Whether or not we say the Lord's prayer using trespasses or sins or debts;
- Whether or not we kneel or stand for communion;
- Whether we serve wine or grape juice;
- Whether we bow or cross ourselves at certain points in the liturgy.

We could go further and name things like...

¹de Mello, Anthony. *The Song of the Bird*. Garden City, NY: Image Book, 1984.

- If we close our eyes when we pray;
- What we wear to church;
- Where we sit in the sanctuary.

Now, to be sure, all of these things hold meaning for some of us at one time or another. They hold meaning because they help us connect with God and bring our hearts and minds into a more attentive and receptive place. I know I look forward to many of our traditions each week and I miss them when they aren't there.

And, we Episcopalians love our traditions. It's part of the beauty of our denomination. We know that generation upon generation have said the same words and moved their hands in a just-so kind of way and have knelt at the exact same times to the exact same prayers. There is something comforting about that.

But no matter how important these things may be, they are ultimately *our* imperatives for "right" worship. They aren't God's imperatives. And if we aren't careful we start to value the appearance or practice of certain traditions as having ultimate meaning in and of themselves. (That's the ashram cat in our story). In other words, these traditions become a sign of the best kind of Christian...the one who is getting it right...at least outwardly.

This is Jesus' warning in our Gospel reading this morning. The Pharisees are confronting Jesus because his disciples are eating with unclean hands. They weren't following the rules and were ignoring Jewish religious tradition, disregarding the required outward signs of inner holiness.

Jesus responds and tries to explain to the Pharisees how easy it is to get distracted with those outward signs and traditions. And, as a result forget the real work of inner holiness. It's when we allow the act of worship to define the purpose of worship.

Now, it's important to notice that Jesus doesn't condemn hand washing in our Gospel. He isn't upset at the tradition itself...remember, tradition can be useful. Tying up the cat removed a distraction. But the cat wasn't the essence of worship.

Jesus is upset at how tradition is being applied. He is upset at how quickly the Pharisees have turned tradition into legalism, a way to point fingers at others

while elevating themselves. They have put all of their energy into policing the practice that they have forgotten that the reason they practice their faith is to promote peace and grace and love for God and for one another. Not to accuse or restrict or limit the access to God's peace and grace and love.

Traditions aren't the problem. How we use them is the issue. Jesus quotes Isaiah saying, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines. You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

As Jesus says...It's not what we put into our mouths...it's what comes out that is unclean. The challenge is to look within at who you are in your heart. James reinforces this idea when he reminds his readers that, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress."

It's whether or not we have cared for one another, not how we said the Lord's Prayer.

*As Debi Thomas writes, "Religion has always had the power to elevate or ruin us. To make us compassionate and creative, or stingy and small-minded. To grant us peace, or stir us to war....The guises vary, but in the end, legalism in any guise deadens us towards God and towards our neighbors....It makes us stingy and small-minded, cowardly and anxious. It strips away our joy and robs us of peace. It causes us, in Jesus's chilling words, to "honor God with our lips" but to "worship him in vain.""*²

Yes, we can hold so tightly to tradition, we can keep ourselves comfortable, and we can also miss the entire point of why we are here. Tradition does not equal holiness. Our liturgy isn't the litmus test of worthiness. How you dress when you come to church doesn't grant you salvation. Whether or not you kneel when you pray doesn't give you a gold star in God's book of right worship.

Folks, we are at an important point in the life of our church. We have faced all kinds of shifting and adjusting when it comes to our traditions in the midst of COVID. We have been required to think differently about what right worship should look like. And with whatever changes we have had to make, whatever

² <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3122-true-religion>

measures we have had to implement, I want to ask you this...has God been present?

Did God leave us when couldn't take communion? Does God judge us when we don't sing out of caution for one another? Does God cringe when we have to worship online? Does God show up because of tradition or because God simply loves us just as we are?

God is going to keep working within you wherever or however you worship. Our job as faithful Christians is to not worry about what traditions are shifting but what is shifting within our hearts.

Amen.