

# “Defiling Traditions”

Deut. 4:1-2, 6-9; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15,  
21-23

August 30, 2009

It is good to be back with you after a bit of time off. We had a nice relaxing time - some stay at home time and some time on the road. One day on the road was particularly long. And I found myself thinking about that drive as I read the account of what the passengers in the back seat of a car reported following a collision in which their car had been involved. A man named Steve [Dalton] had been driving for a long time. It was clear that he was becoming irritable as he drove through the night. They heard him flicking the switch on his high beams to signal approaching cars to lower their headlights. As one oncoming car approached, he signaled to the driver to lower his beams. Nothing happened. The last thing the passengers remember was Steve screaming in anger, "I'll teach this guy to lower his lights." And with that, Steve pulled into the oncoming lane and collided with the car coming toward him. He died in the collision and the occupants of the other car were also killed.

I wish there were a ‘punch line’ to start the sermon off with a bit of humor but that is the whole story. It is sad, ... Even frightening in some respects. Yet, I share this incident with you because it makes me think. And I suspect that such an illustration makes a good starting point to talk about our second scripture reading for today in particular - - - but it also seems to lead well into a discussion of the other scriptures as well as other important matters before us.

The text from James’ epistle is powerful in many respects as it speaks of generosity as a gift that come to us from God and through us to one another. And perhaps one of the way that we can be most generous to one another is by caring enough about the other to really listen. It is good advice .... “let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.” Anger seldom produces God’s righteousness!

It is a good word for us. I don’t like it ..... But it is a good word. I know that there are a lot of people that are just hot heads and they really should pay attention to this word ..... But me. . . . Well, when I get angry there is good reason .... Justifiable ..... Righteous indignation [that’s what one of my seminary professors called it]. And I suspect that we could all say the same .... We don’t get anger except when the situation calls for it {Like someone not moving from high to low beam headlights at night}.

Slow to anger ..... Quick to listen - it is an act of generosity. Both are difficult for us. And that was certainly as true for the Pharisee in the time of Jesus as it is for us. They were never really in any hurry to really listen to Jesus .... But they were in a hurry to get upset with Him and His disciples. Today .... Today it was an issue of traditions.

It was simple, really. The tradition of the church was to always perform a ritual washing as act of respect and cleanliness before God. Washing hands, washing the vessels that held the food - there was a definite protocol that a faithful person observed. Certainly it was and is good hygiene .... But more than that it was a spiritual practice performed in reverences toward God. But the disciples just sat up to the table and started

eating. What were they thinking? Were they born in a barn? Why couldn't they dim their lights? So the emotions flared and listening to each other went out the window. Who even heard Jesus ask the question about what was really important in their relationship with God. What is more important - clean hands or a clean heart? What is really important to God? How often do we forget to ask that question when our traditions are violated and our emotions carry us away. With righteous indignation we quickly swerve toward the bright headlights that offend us.

We have so many traditions - so many things that have always been a part of our lives and our understandings of how things are supposed to be. And when those things are violated ..... Well, sometimes we just do not respond very well. I suppose that I could list a thousand examples if given the time, but I am sure that everyone of us could come up with a quick list of all of the things that others do that we become angry over. Amazingly, Jesus calls us with our Pharisaical tendencies to try to focus on what is important.

Do we honor God with our lips and allow our heart to be far from God? Do we abandon the command of God in order to hold to our traditions? Do we even understand what the command of God is? Do we know the heart of God? Tough questions ..... Questions for which I struggle to know the answer. A lot of times it is just really hard to listen to God because I am so busy being angry because of my own understandings and desires and traditions.

Quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger ..... The Pharisees missed the heart of God because they insisted on clinging to the traditions of the church. It was as though they simply would not hear the heart of God ... a heart that was full of mercy ... a heart that understood His creation and loved His people. What is the command of God? Love God with all your heart - - - yes, washing your hands is a good idea - dimming your headlights is courteous - - but above all, love God and love one another. Aren't these really the great commands - isn't this what God calls us to?

I have to say that I love these scriptures and, at the same time, I find them very difficult this week. In the past couple of weeks the church has held it's national assembly during which a vote was taken on issues that have cause a great deal of consternation over the course of recent years. I am guessing that many of you have read or heard something about the votes that were taken concerning the Human Sexuality document that the church has been struggling with and in particular with specific proposals regarding an official recognizing of people in committed, monogamous gay and lesbian relationships. In addition, the voting included the question of whether or not this church would accept practicing gay and lesbian individuals in such committed relationships to serve as rostered leaders, pastors within the church. Those proposals were voted on and passed. And we know that good Christian folk have disagreed on these issues. Many are rejoicing about the discision - others are not. Some say it ignores the Bibles teaching - others say it is absolutely faithful to the heart of Gods command. Across the church we have faithful Christians standing on both sides of the issue each holding to beliefs that are founded on traditions and deep Biblical convictions. And as I understand the church vote, it invites people and congregations to continue to hold on to their beliefs while at the same time listening respectfully to one another - hold on to your beliefs while at the same time remembering what is really at the heart of the commands of God ..... to love God and one another ... to love mercy and justice .... to walk humbly with God. Where

is it that we get caught up in traditions - and where is it that we are really listening to the heart of God?

There is a song that I have never heard but I love the lyrics. It is entitled "There's More" [by Scott Stivers, from Sojourn CD]. In part it says: [Chorus:] There's more to loving good than hating evil. There's more to doing right than avoiding what is wrong, More to being steadfast than just standing still, More to having faith than being strong.

It's so easy to unite ourselves to face a common foe -

We try to keep the peace by making war.

And we say with crystal clarity what we must fight against -

We've lost sight of what we're fighting for.

Are we fighting for God or tradition? Today remember what is important - remember God's love for you and all people. Be quick to listen - quick to show mercy and love.

AMEN