

“Traditional Mistakes”

a sermon by

The Reverend David H. Green

First Presbyterian Church
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Text: “You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men.” (Mark 7:8)

This Labor Day weekend, we observe one of our nation’s great traditions. This first Monday in September is a great national holiday and celebration. The tradition dates back more than 100 years. In the 1890s, this annual observance was declared a national holiday, a day of rest to honor those who labor throughout our land.

With such honorable intentions, it is easy to understand why our Federal legislative bodies would pass such a law. But, it is noteworthy that our tradition varies from that of most other nations. Throughout the world, workers are celebrated on the first day of May, May Day.

Why does our nation celebrate in September the same event that the rest of the world celebrates in May? Well, it’s difficult for me to say with any certainty, however, our nation first observed this date as a holiday within 60 days of a national election.

A worthy cause is celebrated. A day of rest and recreation is enjoyed, and political points are scored across the nation. This weekend couldn’t possibly be any more American than it already is.

Every people – every nation, each region and every community – has and holds their own traditions. Some of these traditions are born out of the stories that contribute to our sense of identity and belonging to a community. Our stories are reinforced by our traditions because it is through our traditions that we demonstrate many of our own actions.

Traditions

Now, at the very beginning of this sermon, I must acknowledge that there are different kinds of traditions. For example, there are family traditions – celebrations of particular holidays, the way that prayers are (or, are not) spoken at mealtime, the kinds of recipes that are used when preparing family meals.

There are community traditions – holiday celebrations (including those with fireworks and parades) and band concerts are among the traditions of our community. In local government, traditions will even include the processes by which people are elected to office and the way that decisions are made.

There are even traditions surrounding schools and universities. Rumor has it that, even in the state of Texas, certain individuals may be inclined to demonstrate their allegiance to one school or another by wearing certain colors, yelling certain cheers, and maybe even by cheering or jeering during certain sporting events.

Notice what these different kinds of traditions provide. These traditions provide a sense of connection. They reinforce the stories that influence our identities. Certain traditions may even unite us or perhaps even divide us as a people. Traditions can be good and have an important place in life. They can even work to remind us of our identity as a family or as a people of God.

Notice also what these different kinds of traditions absolutely cannot do. Earthly traditions do not make us any more righteous in the eyes of God. Worldly traditions simply cannot and do not make us holy.

The Heart and the Hands

Traditions can be meaningful, reverent, fun, and even politically expedient. But earthly traditions are not – and cannot become – holy. It is never appropriate to elevate earthly traditions to the place that belongs to the heavenly. And yet, it is exactly this practice that Jesus found among the people of God.

Jesus found a community that practiced its important traditional rituals. The only problem was the fact that they believed that these rituals, which were intended to clean the hands, would also clean their hearts.

Jesus' comments to the religious leaders were both stern and clear, "You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men." Jesus even went on to speak of the ability of the heart to defile the hands. "Hear me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him."

Jesus words seem to be quite clear, but the people around him simply cannot understand what he's talking about. Not even his disciples understand. So Jesus continues to explain to his disciples that we are not defiled by the things that we touch with our hands, "since it enters, not his heart but his stomach, and so passes on."

This is far from a commandment that we are not to wash our hands. The dirt on our hands can make us sick. But that is something different from that which can defile our very heart and soul. Jesus continued with these words:

"What comes out of a man is what defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man."

The people of the church – complete with their good intentions and their actions that were intended to be faithful – had lost sight of a very important principal.

Earthly traditions, even religious traditions, can be meaningful and reverent.

However, earthly traditions are not – and cannot become – holy. It is never appropriate to elevate earthly traditions to the place that belongs to the heavenly. And yet, this is exactly what they were trying to do.

From Heaven to Earth

Though we do not have the ability to take something earthly and to convert it into something Holy, our God does have the authority and the ability to take that which is heavenly and to bring it down to a place that makes it accessible to the earthly.

In the 16th century the church, as it existed in that day, had fallen into a variety of mistaken practices. In an attempt to raise money to complete construction of Saint Peter's Basilica, the church had started the practice of selling indulgences. In exchange for the payment of a certain price, certain sins were said to be forgiven in advance.

Just as in the community that Jesus had encountered, the religious leaders were attempting to take something earthly and to convert it into something Holy. But that can't be done.

In an attempt to correct the errant teachings of the church, Reformers returned to Scripture for their guidance. As they returned to the pages of the Bible, they found that the church had strayed. Their situation was reminiscent of the words of the Prophet Isaiah.

“For the LORD has poured out upon you a spirit of deep sleep, and has closed your eyes, the prophets, and covered your heads, the seers. And the vision of all this has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed. When men give it to one who can read, saying, ‘Read this,’ he says, ‘I cannot, for it is sealed.’ And when they give the book to one who cannot read, saying, ‘Read this,’ he says, ‘I cannot read.’”

The Protestant Reformation, though far from perfect, did set right certain aspects of the life of the church.

For example, the Reformers questioned the meaning of the word Sacrament. In the church of the 16th century, there were several rites of the Church, including a few earthly traditions that had been named as Sacraments. This was an attempt to take the earthly and to elevate it to the place of the Holy.

In our Reformed Tradition, Sacraments are limited to those actions that were instituted by Jesus *and* that Jesus commanded us to continue doing. In our tradition, there are only two Sacraments – Baptism and Communion.

Baptism and Communion are not to be confused with the earthly traditions of the church. These events are not created by people in an attempt to reach up into the heavens by taking something earthly and attempting to make it into something holy.

The Sacraments of Baptism and Communion are both the work of God.

In a few moments we shall celebrate the Sacrament of Communion. You will hear the words that Jesus himself spoke to his closest disciples, including his instruction that we are to do this in remembrance of Him.

At this table we are not reaching out and reaching upward to heaven using ideas and actions of our own making.

Here we acknowledge that Almighty God reach outward and downward from heaven above. Knowing that we ourselves are unable to reach up and into heaven, our God has reached out to us.

Yes, it is true that we are unable to reach up into heaven. But, it is also true that our God can, and has, reached into this earth to touch our hearts and our lives. It is true that God can, and does, take that which is earthly and convert us into that which is Holy.

END NOTES