

Matthew 15:1-12

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 before they eat." He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.' But you say that whoever tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,' then that person need not honor the father. ***So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God.*** You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

*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.'*"

Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?"

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Word had come to Jerusalem that a man named Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee was teaching heresy and perhaps even blaspheming God. This was not a new, or even a recent phenomenon, but the officials in the temple sent the first team out to check it out anyway. These were not district or regional investigators, these were the "feds" of antiquity. They hadn't been sent from the county government or Frankfort. These men were from Jerusalem, the equivalent of Washington DC. Clearly the reports were troubling enough that the high priest believed that a message must be sent.

When they arrived and joined the crowd of followers they began to notice that Jesus was sort of lax in the little things. For example, Jesus and the disciples did not wash their hands before they ate. And not knowing the nature of the man they were dealing with, they decided to do Jesus a favor and point this out to him. That, as they say, was their first mistake.

That's because Jesus was a radical, and remember that radical comes from a Latin word that means "root", Jesus was one who emphasized the basics, or the root doctrines that came from places like the Ten Commandments. Remember that one of those commandments is, "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." (Ex. 20:12)

The commandment is phrased oddly isn't it. It sounds like it should be, "Honor your father and mother so that *their* days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." But the commandment is pitched in such a way for us to understand that it is our best interests to do that as if to say that by honoring our parents, we take care of

ourselves.

Jesus accused the Pharisees and scribes of taking care of themselves, but at the expense of father and mother, not in honoring them. The money that they should have been using to take care of father and mother was going to the temple treasury and lots of luck to you mom and dad!

When I was younger, I used to read stories like this and wonder about how the Pharisees and scribes could be so far off base when Jesus laid it out to them as clearly as he did. How much clearer could he have been? It's clear to you isn't it? It's just as clear to me.

How could they be so dense? It made me feel good when I knew I understood what was going on and they didn't. Made me feel like a good and wise Christian, until had one of those wilderness moments. I have to tell you that I hate wilderness moments. A wilderness moment is related to the season of Lent except instead of limiting the event to forty days in February and March, it just has to be a moment, and it could happen any time.

A wilderness moment is a humbling moment and it is a corrective for all the times I thought I was at the top of the heap, understood and perhaps even practiced the radical calling of Jesus Christ.

This particular wilderness moment was when it all comes crashing down on my head and I realized that just understanding what Jesus was talking about is not enough.

The Pharisees and scribes were not fools, neither were they stupid, although the gospel writers would have us believe they were. Why? Because they didn't like the Pharisees or any other vestige of official Judaism that practiced a policy that had led to the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth.

As I said, the Pharisees were not fools and especially when they were from headquarters. They might have responded to Jesus in kind with another commandment notably the first, the "no other Gods before me," (not even father or mother). They might have cited the eighth suggesting that giving our resources to any but God was in fact stealing.

Jesus might have come back and spoken to the spirit of the Law and not the letter. He might have said that we have an obligation to our parents just as our children have to us. (And we know from many other Bible stories, how important it was to have children if, for no other reason than to care for their parents when they got old.) After all, Jesus took care of his mother. He wasn't always nice to her, but he seemed to keep her close among his followers.

Well, I'll admit it, I'm just having fun here trying to evade the deeper issue by focusing on the more superficial one.

Why is it that we have to move away from the basic teachings of our religion and develop something called tradition that ultimately carries us so far from those teachings as to make them unrecognizable at worst and a mere footnote at best. Sometimes I think that God is tradition; that God is not hugely dancing beyond our imaginings but has been reduced by tradition to “the big man upstairs.” Or worse, “my co-pilot”. Maybe it’s just our nature. Maybe-- because we can’t consider anything that lives in and beyond our imaginations seriously, it’s better to reduce God to something we can lay hold of. “How do I know? The Bible tells me so.”

By the time we get to Genesis 2, God has been reduced from the One who birthed light out of darkness and creator of the universe, to a supporting role in a soap opera set in the Garden of Eden. I don’t know how many “back to basics” sermons you’ve heard or how many I’ve tried to preach, but count this among the most recent if only because God is calling us to do the hard work of recognizing that something greater than the big man upstairs is going on here, and tradition, while handy, is not going to sustain us anymore than it would sustain the Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem.

It is not for nothing that someone said that the seven last words of the church are, “That’s the way we’ve always done it.” Tradition is not the rock on which we stand, but the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ defines that solid foundation. In consideration of all that means to you and to me, we might consider branching out, overcoming fears we believe might lie in the future; recognizing that we might have to review what it means to go back to the basics, because those basics will save us while the tradition will not.

I know that we are secure on the traditions. We have inherited them, but they have not been good to us, they have given us permission to languish and find security in them while all around us the world is changing and we are getting older. In just the last three weeks we have had two terrible reminders of that.

But it is in the basics, in the Christianity 101 where we find a living word, a saving word, a reminder to not be afraid-- for God in Jesus Christ is with us. God Immanuel is with us. At our time of greatest concern, of doubt, of fear, God in faith, God in hope, God in love is with us.

So look to the future as a challenge, as an exercise in Christian faith, as a promise from God. Don’t be afraid to fail because in Christ, if we are focused on the radical, the root words of Jesus, we will not fail not because of what I say, but because of what we believe.