

## Ordinary 22B: Trick Tradition

### Deuteronomy 4: 1-2, 6-9

“So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. 2You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you. 6You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!’ 7For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? 8And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? 9”But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children—”

This is Moses speaking to the Hebrews whom he’d led through the wilderness for 40 years. Standing at the threshold of the promised land, which promised a new beginning, Moses is about to give them the laws, not just to repeat the Ten Commandments which were the foundations of all laws, but the whole 9 yards. He is about to give them the Torah, the statutes and ordinances, the instructions for communal and national life. It was to be a rule of life, controlling public behavior as well as religious practice and political affairs.

But first, Moses teaches them the importance of divine instructions to form a people worthy of the relationship with God. He reminds the people that these “statutes and ordinances” represent a gracious invitation into the relationship. Here we see again God providing what the people need to remain in relationship with God, from generation to generation.

Three things to note in this passage. First, the people are told not to tamper with God’s laws by adding their own ideas or removing anything from them. Second, when they live according to God’s laws, they become a witness to other peoples of God who is the source of their wisdom and discernment; other nations will notice the different choices, values, and character of this people formed by God, and who is near to them and acts to protect them. There is a God who insists on being in relationship; a God like no other. Third, they are reminded, not to forget their experience as they lived in this relationship and to tell of it to their children and to the children of their children....

This is what God provided through Moses, after rescuing them from the captivity in Egypt before they set foot in their new home. These are the words the people of Israel would remember, at many a critical juncture in their lives; their God is a God of second chances and

do-overs, who gives them a new beginning and another chance to live as God's people by following God's law, even when they had failed at it before. Let us see how their children's children fared, generations and generations afterwards.

Listen now to the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to Mark. Excerpts from Chapter 7, following the scenes where Jesus had fed the five thousand, walked on water, got on the boat with the disciples and calmed the wind, and people were flocking to him because he healed the sick.

1Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, 2they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. 3(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 4and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash, and there are also many other traditions that they observe: the washing of cups and pots and bronze kettles and beds.) 5So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders but eat with defiled hands?" 6He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; 7in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' 8" You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

14Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 15there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." 21For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: sexual immorality, theft, murder, 22adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, debauchery, envy, slander, pride, folly. 23All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

Now, there is no biblical law about washing hands before eating; there's no texts in the Hebrew Scriptures that require anyone to wash hands before eating, but apparently, by Jesus's time, the thing called "the tradition of the elders" have developed, in addition to the commandment of God. Isaiah was already calling it out as "human precepts" taught as doctrine.

Tradition of the elders, which Jesus simply calls "human tradition" contrasting to God's commandment, refers to the collection of case law built up to show how the Torah was to be put into practice. They were particular interpretations of laws given through Moses.

Tradition functioned as a fence around the Law of Moses. By creating a rule that, if you kept it, you would not be in a position to violate the law at the core. Their original intention was good; it was designed to honor and protect the law. For example, there was no biblical law that required anyone to wash their hands before eating, but the priests were instructed to wash their hands and feet before ministering at the altar, which included eating the holy meat of the

sacrifice. And in other place in the Scripture, God says of the Israelites, “you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” So, the Pharisees argued that this meant that all Israelites should be as holy as priests, and hence all Jews should wash their hands before eating.

Tradition, then, was additional human precepts resulting from the choice to “error on the safe side” to keep God’s commandment.

Israel’s religion had come to include many laws about purity or holiness, to comply with the command in Leviticus, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” By Jesus’ time, the tradition designed to protect the law had become a heavy burden. It had taken life-giving commandment of God and sucked life right out of it.

Jesus opposes this tradition of the elders, while honoring God’s commandment. You may wonder what I mean by the sermon title “Trick Traditions,” I mean it like there a Trick Question, by which we are led away from the original path of thinking. Firmly set Tradition tricks people into thinking that it is following or not following the tradition, that makes and keeps someone good or bad, clean or unclean, pure or defiled, while often leading people away from the life-giving purpose of God’s commandment.

Tradition may have started as a helpful guide for people to put God’s law into practice, but over time they became the means of judgment; tradition tricks people into believing those external things, such as food, and practices, such as staying away from certain people, not touching certain things, not doing certain things made you righteous and acceptable in God’s sight.

By now, you may be wondering, why are we being preached about how the Pharisees from Jerusalem messed up the ancient Biblical law with their tedious tradition? Why do we care about the “tradition of the elders” when we are the followers of Jesus? Well, we care because we are the children of their children’s children, the generation that is living this present moment and God is still calling us into the life in relationship with God.

AND we are still at this “fencing” the law business. We are fencing with our human precepts what Jesus has freely offered to the world. For example, today many Christians, and our own Presbyterian Church (USA) until recently, “fenced” the Lord’s Table, so that the people who did not meet certain criteria were kept out and away from the Lord’s Table, from partaking in the bread of life that came down from heaven for the life of the world. Being hungry for that

bread did not cut it; if you were not Catholic, if you divorced, if you were not heterosexual, if you were not baptized, if you were (fill in the blank.)

The evangelical Christian college that I went to had a fence that was called the “Pledge.” It was a covenant to refrain from 3 behaviors: drinking, smoking, and dancing. It wasn’t just a social contract to keep the campus free of cigarette butts. I tricked us into thinking those three points would ensure only serious Christians attend the school.

All these are a form of “tradition of the elders,” the Trick Tradition that tricks us into embracing the “holier than thou” mode of operation. Jesus disagrees, and says the source of evil and what makes us unholy is found in one’s heart. In biblical sense, heart is not just the emotional center; it is where thinking and discernment take place. What? Evil is found in our hearts? But wait; isn’t the heart where we ask Jesus to come in and be filled with the Holy Spirit?

Jesus was bold when he said he is the bread of life that came down from heaven, and asked us to eat him. That bold Jesus, who offers such radical hospitality would, yes, dare come into our hearts, the very place where he knows we are nursing the energy that resist and oppose God’s gracious invitation to Life Abundant. It is in our hearts, Jesus points out, that we build that fence around to keep others from taste and see that the Lord is good.

Do we realize how bold a thing it is for us to ask Jesus, ever so humbly, to take us just as I am, without one plea. Do we realize how bold a thing we profess when we sing, “Lord, I want to be a Christian IN MY HEART, in my heart...” It is a daring thing but where else would you expect Jesus to meet us but at the very source of our inner struggle and suffering? Where else in our being do we need the healing presence of the Holy Spirit, to save us from ourselves, from our self-destructive and exploitive thoughts and urges. Jesus named a few, and I dare you to come up with a list of your own, as I work on mine.

Trick Tradition may seem to offer a shortcut to following God’s law, but following God’s life-giving will and intention for us calls for wisdom and discernment; there is no short cut for allowing the Spirit to do the work of genuine transformation of our hearts. We are, from generation to generation, a perpetual work in progress.

And if we ask Jesus to love and accept us just as we are, without one plea, we, too, are to love and accept our neighbors, for God’s invitation is to us all and God has no use for the fence we build.