

The Rev. Joel Petruschke  
Our Saviour Lutheran Church  
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Pentecost 14

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, today's gospel reading might leave us scratching our heads.

Today's gospel reading might leave us puzzled and confused.

Today's gospel reading might leave us perplexed and bewildered.

I mean, what is the point?

Some Pharisees and scribes notice that Jesus' disciples are not washing their hands.

And they are upset by this fact.

They are upset that Jesus' disciples are not following the tradition of the elders.

And so then, in response to the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus quotes Isaiah.

“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.”

So what is this gospel all about?

It is about the reasons behind what it is that we do.

For sometimes, we as people do things but the things we do have lost their meaning.

The word for this kind of behavior...

The word for doing things just for the sake of doing them, but in which the meaning has been lost...

The word for this kind of behavior is “legalism,” or “traditionalism.”

And traditionalism or legalism is what Jesus is opposing here.

Traditionalism or legalism is the wrongful behavior of the Pharisees and scribes.

The theologian Jaroslav Pelikan had a catchy turn of phrase to explain what is going on here in our gospel lesson.

Jaroslav Pelikan said this...

Tradition is the living faith of the dead.

Tradition is that which has been passed down from the generations who came before.

Tradition is the living faith of the dead.

Tradition is the meaning behind what we do, and so it is the living faith, it has value, meaning, and purpose in our lives.

Tradition is the living faith of the dead.

On the other hand, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.

Traditionalism is the process of just going through the motions.

Traditionalism is the not knowing why we do what we do.

And so traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.

Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.

And so the traditionalism in our gospel reading is the washing of hands, and the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.

PAUSE

Now, we know today, that washing our hands and cleaning our dishes is a good practice.

Washing our hands has been all the more stressed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Washing hands, washing dishes is good hygiene.

But this is not what the Pharisees and scribes are trying to emphasize.

The idea of good hygiene was not even on the radar back in Jesus' day.

No, the Pharisees and scribes stress the need to wash hands and wash dishes because it has been part of their religious tradition.

But Jesus' point is that the Pharisees and scribes have lost track of why they have washed hands and washed dishes.

The meaning of the tradition has been lost, and they are just going through the motions.

The tradition has become traditionalism, the dead faith of the living.

And Jesus quotes Isaiah to emphasize this point, “This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me.”

Jesus is saying that the people are going through the motions in their religion but it has no impact on their lives.

They go through the motions but it doesn’t mean anything to them.

In our culture, we say of persons who are in their 40s or 50s and who lack a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives...

In our culture, persons who are just going through the motions sometimes have a huge existential predicament.

We call it a “mid-life crisis,” in which traditionalism has overcome their entire lives.

And persons who experience a mid-life crisis wonder, “What is my purpose?”

They wonder, “What is the meaning of my life?”

Religion, too, can go through a mid-life crisis.

This is what we see happening in our gospel lesson today.

Here in this passage, Jesus is questioning the meaning and purpose of the religion of his day.

What meaning and purpose does it have for people?

PAUSE

Sometimes I wonder if this is not what is happening to our Christian faith today.

I wonder if Christianity is also going through a mid-life crisis.

What is the purpose of Christianity?

What is the meaning of our Christian faith?

More important, what is the meaning and purpose of the Christian faith for individuals?

Let me give you an example of what I mean.

PAUSE

Some time back much earlier in the pandemic, our Bishop shared a message with the pastors, congregations, and the people of our Lower Susquehanna Synod.

The Bishop's message was about how we need to care for each other during this pandemic.

The Bishop's message was about the importance of wearing masks, practicing social distance, washing your hands and following the other protocols so as to reduce the risk of transmission of the disease.

And the Bishop's words were quite powerful.

It wasn't just the usual admonition like we were hearing on the news.

Wear your masks, wash your hands, watch your distance...blah, blah, blah, right?

No, the Bishop's message was this.

If we truly consider ourselves to be people of God, who do God's will, then we want to follow God's commandments.

If we call ourselves "Christians" then we can't help but do what God tells us to do.

And the Bishop said one of those things God tells us to do is to follow the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment.

Thou shall not kill.

Obviously. Christian people don't kill other people.

It is one of our "traditions."

But that tradition of not killing other people may have lost its meaning for us.

Like Isaiah said, “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”

In other words, what does the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment really mean?

Does it mean anything to us? Or has the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment slid into the domain of traditionalism?

So, the Bishop reminded us of what Martin Luther had to say about the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment.

The Bishop reminded us that Martin Luther interpreted the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment, saying, “We are to fear and love God so that we do not hurt our neighbor in any way, but help him or her in all their physical needs.”

We are to fear and love God so that we do not hurt our neighbor in any way, but help him or her in all their physical needs.

Not wearing our masks, not social distancing, not washing our hands, these are not acts of independence and freedom.

No, ignoring COVID protocols was acting in defiance of 5<sup>th</sup> commandment.



We are to help our neighbor in all their physical needs, which means we are to do what we can reduce the transmission of the coronavirus.

So, the Bishop helped us appreciate how the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment had lost its meaning for us.

The Bishop helped us be people who honor God with our lips as well as our hearts.

There is a tradition associated with the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment in which we are to care for our neighbor.

It was a great teaching moment.

Christianity has a great bearing on how we live our lives with purpose and meaning, but sometimes we forget, and so we need to be reminded.

PAUSE

For me, when it comes to breaking out of traditionalism and legalism, I try to always remind myself that it is not about what I have to do, but it is about what I get to do.

It is not about what we have to do, but it is about what we get to do.

The commandments of God are not about all those things that we shall not do—thou shall not kill, thou shall not steal, thou shall not lie.

It is not about legalism. But it is about what we can do to care for our neighbor's life, and it is about what we can do to help our neighbor keep what is theirs, and it is about what we can do to speak well of our neighbor.

God's will is not legalism as much as it is hesed.

God's will is about hesed.

Hesed is an Old Testament term that means going above and beyond what is required of us in God's law.

Hesed restores purpose and meaning to life.

So much of legal system is about what we are not to do so as not to harm others.

But hesed is about proactive love, even when the law never requires us to be loving.

That is hesed, that is God's will.

PAUSE

Think about it like this.

The world in which we live is like a table with three legs, only one of the legs is a bit shorter than the others.

And we know what happens when one leg is not as long as the other, don't we?

The table rocks and wobbles, and it is terribly annoying.

Well, our world is like that wobbly table. Our world is not in balance.

Our world is unstable and it is annoying to all of us.

Our world suffers under the weight of sin, of injustice, of poverty...

Our world suffers under the weight of disease, of racial inequality, of sexism...

Our world wobbles.

And when a table wobbles, what do we do? We wedge something under that third leg to stabilize the table.

In our world, it is not God's law that ultimately stabilizes the world.

No, it is not God's law, but God's hesed that stabilizes this world.

God's hesed was made manifest in his Son Jesus Christ, whom God sent into the world.

God didn't have to. There was no law saying God had to send his Son.

God went beyond, and out of great love for God's creation God righted the wobbly world.

Friends, the meaning and purpose of life is love in the form of hesed.

Indeed, Christianity is grounded in the tradition that is the love of the neighbor.

That is what gives meaning to our faith. That is what gives purpose to our lives.

So, in everything you do, give meaning to it, by doing hesed, by going beyond what is required, by doing everything in love, and your life embody the living faith of the dead and risen Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.