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Our Saviour Lutheran Church  
Pentecost 15

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and 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, his name was Jaroslav Pelikan.

Kind of an unusual sounding name, Jaroslav Pelikan, but that is because his parents were of Slovak descent.

Jaroslav, however, was born not in Slovakia, but in Akron, Ohio, and he was raised Lutheran.

But much later in life he left the ELCA and joined the Orthodox Church in America.

His interest in iconography influenced his change in affiliation from Lutheranism to Orthodoxy.

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Now during his brilliant academic career, Jaroslav was a professor, a professor of theology and of history, particularly the history of Christianity.

He was a professor at Yale University, having taught at Yale for over three decades, and becoming professor emeritus.

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In Lutheran circles, particularly Lutheran academic circles, Professor Jaroslav Pelikan is something of a giant.

Unfortunately, he is no longer with us, having died back in 2006.

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But I bring his name up this morning because of a particular saying of his that is not only cleverly worded, but is profoundly insightful.

The saying is this.

Tradition is the living faith of the dead.

Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.

Let me repeat that.

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

Now what that means is this.

Tradition is that which gives meaning to our everyday lives.

Tradition then is the living faith.

But tradition, this living faith is that which has been passed down to us from those preceding us.

Tradition then is the living faith of the dead.

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

And what Jaroslav means by that is this.

If we simply go through the motions...

If we simply do what we do...

If we simply practice our traditions, but no longer know why we do them...

If what we do does not have meaning for our lives, then what we do is the “dead faith of the living.”

That is the definition of traditionalism—just practicing our traditions as we have always done them, but no longer knowing why we do them.

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And this, this traditionalism is what we see going on in our Gospel passage this morning.

Yes, our Gospel reading is a clear example of traditionalism.

Our Gospel reading is a cut and dry case of traditionalism.

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Now, it is worth noting that this Gospel passage is not about good hygiene.

To be sure, we in our modern day, health conscious world would have to agree with the Pharisees and the scribes in our text.

The disciples should wash their hands. It is how we get rid of germs.

We should use soap and water to clean our hands, especially if we are going to be handling food.

So, the fact that Jesus bypasses this idea of hand washing tells us that this text is not about good hygiene.

No, instead this text is about traditionalism.

It is about knowing why we do what we do.

It is about knowing why we continue to practice certain traditions.

Jesus says as much when he quotes Isaiah.

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

Thus Jesus is saying that those who act religiously, like the Pharisees and scribes...

They go through the motions, they practice their traditions, but they have forgotten what the traditions mean.

They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

Now, just about now... it would be good to have an example of what I mean, or an example of what Jesus means.

And maybe the best example comes from earlier in this Gospel of Mark.

Earlier in Mark's Gospel Jesus comments on the Sabbath Day, saying, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.”

Jesus said that (if we remember) because the Pharisees were upset that Jesus' disciples had pluck heads of grain from a field they were passing through.

They had plucked the grain on the Sabbath Day, when no one was to do any kind of work, and the plucking of grain would be construed as harvesting, that is, doing work.

So, the Pharisees are upset and they say to Jesus, “Why do your disciples do what is not lawful on the sabbath?”

To which Jesus explains that the sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.

Again, it is another clear, cut and dry case of traditionalism.

The Pharisees have fallen into the trap of just doing things as they have always done.

They keep the sabbath, yes, but they have though forgotten that original intention of the sabbath.

The sabbath was understood to be a gift from God, not a burden to be followed blindly.

And this understanding of the sabbath as a gift, seems to have been a very big deal for Jesus.

For also in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus heals a man with a withered hand **ON THE SABBATH**.

On another occasion, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus heals a man with edema, swelling of the body, **ON THE SABBATH**.

In that instance, Jesus even calls out the Pharisees saying, “Who among you if you had a child or an ox that had fallen into a well, wouldn’t immediately provide aid and get them out of the well, even on the sabbath?”

So, Jesus uses the sabbath over and over again to talk about traditionalism.

Because the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders forgot the essential meaning of the sabbath.

The sabbath is a gift, it is meant to give life.

And, this is what all the commandments are about really—to give life. But down through history the commandments turned into a burden.

That is why what Martin Luther does with the interpretation of the commandments is so very powerful.

Martin Luther said that instead of seeing the commandments as simply passive actions—don't kill, don't steal, don't lie, don't commit adultery...

Instead of seeing the commandments as a list of things we shouldn't do, which can become burdensome...

Indeed, how difficult it is to abide by the commandments when we spin out the commandments as a list of don'ts.

Don't kill, don't steal—don't kill our neighbor by hoarding (by stealing) an unfair share of the world's resources, while others have very little.

Don't lie, don't commit adultery—don't lie by justifying to ourselves that we are more deserving, we are more entitled than others, such that we destroy our own humanity, adulterate our own humanity, because of a lack of compassion and mercy for the other.

Yes, when we truly try to live solely by passive morality—don't do this, don't do that, life becomes a great burden.

And so, Martin Luther transformed the commandments by telling us to be active with regards to the commandments.

Don't kill, also means, "how can I help my neighbor sustain their life." Maybe we offer to drive them to their doctor's appointment, or offer to run errands for them, or do outdoor chores for them which they shouldn't be doing.

Don't steal, also means, "how can I help my neighbor keep what is theirs." Maybe we keep an eye on their home for them when they are away, or offer to bring in their paper or collect their mail for them, or turn on their house lights for them in the evening.

Don't lie, also means, "Speak well of your neighbor always." Interpret your neighbor's actions in the best way possible.

Don't commit adultery, also means, "helping our neighbor support their marriage." Maybe we make a meal for our neighbors, or surprise them with a gift certificate so they can go out for a dinner and a movie on their own.

We see, Luther transformed the commandments such that they are about what they were intended to be—a gift, a gift for life, and not a burden, the result of traditionalism.

In ancient Judaism and even for a long time after, the commandments were the victim of traditionalism.

Indeed those who were called to keep the commandments were among those whom Isaiah called out: “They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”

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But, I want us also to see that Jaroslav’s clever saying is not just helpful when we think about our faith life.

In truth, we can apply this saying to most anything in life.

To be sure, we should consider how traditionalism creeps into all aspects of our lives.

Perhaps, we need to reconsider where and when we vacation, if our usual vacation spot and our usual week of vacation are such that not all of the family can participate.

Vacation then has lost something of its meaning, if we can’t enjoy our family to its fullest.

If we continue to vacation as normal without considering why we are still vacationing at the same place and at the same time, then traditionalism has likely reared its ugly head.

Or perhaps we need to consider our favorite dining out place with friends.

Maybe the location is no longer convenient, and we and our friends find the location too far away or too loud so as to enjoy conversation.

But if we still dine at the same place, even though it is not conducive for deepening our friendship, if the location is more a burden than a gift, well then traditionalism has again reared its ugly head.

A good book on what we are talking about, that is, looking at our lives through the lens of traditionalism...

A good book on this subject is called *Think Again*, by Adam Grant.

I would highly recommend it, even though he expresses what we are talking about a little differently.

Grant talks about how knowledge and wisdom are something acquired most broadly and deeply when we are willing to approach all of life from the perspective of the scientific method.

The scientific method challenges us to take what we think we know and create an hypothesis to test that knowledge.

Indeed this is how science continues to build on its knowledge bank about life, we continue to test by hypothesis and so then deepen our knowledge.

It is what Einstein did to deepen our knowledge about gravity, in order to take gravity to the next step beyond Newtonian laws. Einstein thought again about gravity.

All of life is a matter of testing what we think we know, what we think we experience, so as to break out of traditionalism—just going about doing it the way we always have, without realizing a) we have lost the original meaning, or b) that there is even deeper meaning to be found.

Jesus and subsequently Christianity is the ultimate example of this.

Christianity transformed, deepened our understanding of life, by means of looking at death in a new way.

Humanity had always understood death the same way, at the end of life.

And then came along Christianity, whereby in Christ, we die in baptism, and all of life then is moving out of that death in baptism, toward healing and that ultimate healing at the end of life.

And so, Christianity has restored meaning to life, as a journey of spiritual renewal and well-being.

Baptism, new life emerging from death in the baptismal waters, is Christianity's greatest tradition.

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And so, we NOW embrace all of life with renewed understanding and meaning.

As Grant suggests we NOW “think again” about all that we do, and ask ourselves do the things I do give life.

If not, then it is time to peel away those instances of traditionalism, and seek renewal and ever deeper meaning.

Thanks be to God. Amen.