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THE WORD OF GOD TAUGHT IN ITS TRUTH AND PURITY
Mark 7:1-13; Proper 16B; Pentecost 14B; August 24-25, 2024

In our Mark seven Gospel Reading, scribes of the Pharisees complained to Jesus that His disciples did not follow the tradition of the Jewish elders. By this, they accused Jesus of being a bad rabbi. Jesus teaches us in this text about the difference between tradition and doctrine in the Church.

Traditions are things that are handed down from one generation to another because they remain useful or beneficial. The Jewish traditions at issue in our Reading were things like ceremonial washing of hands before eating and after shopping at the marketplace, or washing certain dishes or dining couches in Jewish homes. Jewish rabbis taught that tradition was important because it functioned like a “fence” around God’s Word of Law, the *Torah*, doctrine God handed down to them through Moses.

Their traditions functioned like the fences the National Park Service puts along the rim of the Grand Canyon. The fences keep you from getting too close to the edge where you might lose your balance, slip and fall to your death.

But rabbis disagreed about of the source of tradition. Some rabbis believed that tradition was the unwritten part of God’s Law to Moses, so tradition had God’s authority behind it. Others believed that Moses and rabbis after him developed tradition over time to help Jews not violate God’s Law. The scribes confronting Jesus believed that tradition came from God and should be kept by everyone.

God’s law, doctrine, in the Garden of Eden was, Don’t eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or you will die. Eve’s tradition to keep from breaking the law was, Don’t even touch it. Jewish tradition functioned liked that. Because violating God’s Law, doctrine, came with the threat of death, it was best not to get too close to it. Tradition put a “fence” around God’s Law.

Doctrine is God’s Word, both Law and Gospel, the teaching of who He is, who we are before God, and what He wants for us. Doctrine is from God and written down for us in God’s Word, the Bible. God works faith and life in us through doctrine.

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Jesus noted that the scribes claimed to hold to the doctrine of God's Word yet made doctrine secondary to keeping their traditions. Jesus' example of a doctrine was the Fourth Commandment: **Honor your father and your mother** (Ex. 20:12), and God's threat later in Exodus that, **"Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die"** (21:17). Yet, the Jews had a tradition that, if you dedicated a gift in service to God, called **"Corban"** in Hebrew, then you did not have to take care of your parents. Jesus observed: **"You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men... thus making void the Word of God by your tradition that you have handed down."**

A doctrine is God's Word to us that endures forever. A tradition, even a good one designed to help us keep God's Word, if that tradition is made equal to or more important than doctrine, is actually sinful to keep, a violation of God's Word.

Putting tradition over doctrine is a problem also in the Christian Church and remains a point of contention between Lutherans and Roman Catholics. Lutherans teach that doctrine is based on God's Word alone, the Bible: *Sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone. Roman Catholics teach that doctrine is based on three things: the Bible, Church traditions, and the authority of the Pope. Lutherans during the Reformation did not reject traditions if they were helpful in teaching Christian doctrine and piety to people. Examples: Lutherans kept the basic order of Service with Holy Communion cleansed of false teaching and offered it every Lord's Day in their congregations; kept celebrating the Church Year; and pastors still wore the traditional vestments of their office as they led the Service, preached the Gospel, and administered the Sacraments. Traditions can be helpful in teaching God's Word, doctrine, by doing it in an orderly way. We don't believe that keeping traditions saves us, but we keep traditions because they help us teach God's Word in its truth and purity.

Classes start Monday in our parochial school where we have daily teaching of God's Word. Those in 5th through 8th grades not attending our school will begin their catechism instruction the Wednesday after Labor Day. The Sunday after Labor Day kicks off Sunday School. Check the Bulletin insert for your options. If you and your family members have not been in one of these classes, make this your new tradition. It's one worth keeping.

Why do we keep traditions like these? For the sake of doctrine, the teaching of God's Word. The traditional tool we use to help teach doctrine from God's Word, the Bible, is Luther's Small Catechism. Learning and memorizing the chief parts of the Small Catechism in preparation for Confirmation is a tradition, but the content in the Catechism is doctrine, not tradition. A tradition is something "handed down" from one generation to another, but, in this case, what the Catechism hands down is doctrine.

St. Paul's doctrine of the Lord's Supper is an example of a "tradition" he received, which he handed down to the Corinthian congregation. **"For I received from the Lord what I also delivered ("traditioned") to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, 'This is My body...'"** (1 Cor. 11:23-24a).

Sadly, not every church understands doctrine and tradition rightly. Is the whole Bible God's Word, or is it the Word of God mixed with human traditions? Our Church teaches that the whole Bible is without error, the Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith in God through it, and is the source of all doctrine. Other churches teach that the Bible is a mix of doctrine and tradition, and these traditions can be erroneous and will need to change with the times. They teach that the Bible contains both the truth of God's Word and the errors of man, and we must distinguish them from each other. How can we know what is true and false? They say that the individual gets to decide based on scientific theories, viewpoints of historians, and, ultimately, the feelings of the individual, all which change over time.

Does God's Word change with the times based on our opinions and feelings? What does God's Word teach about itself? **"The Word of the LORD endures forever."** Peter quoted this to remind the Church: **"And this Word is the Good News that was preached to you"** (Is. 40:8; 1 Peter 1:24). What is lost if God's Word is reduced to the level of "tradition," or we do as the Pharisees did, put tradition over doctrine? The Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, is lost. Let us be bold with St. Paul and say: **"I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes"** (Ro. 1:16).

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The Second Commandment, God's law, is doctrine: **You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God/You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain** (as an empty, useless thing). Martin Luther's Small Catechism on the First Petition of the Lord's Prayer, "**Hallowed by Thy name,**" shows how God's name and Word are directly connected. "*How is God's name kept holy?* God's name is kept holy when the Word of God is taught in its true and purity, and we, as the children of God, also lead holy lives according to it. Help us to do this, dear Father in heaven! But anyone who teaches or lives contrary to God's Word, profanes the name of God among us. Protect us from this, heavenly Father!"

God's Word is true and must be taught purely if it is to remain true. Something that is "pure" does not have anything else mixed in with it. Before Jesus died and rose, He prayed to His Father for His disciples. "**Sanctify them in the Truth; Your Word is Truth**" (Jn 17:17). To be "sanctified" is to be made holy by faith in the Truth Himself, Jesus, the Son of the Father. This faith is worked by the Holy Spirit through God's Word and Sacraments. People are not saved by any old faith, but only by true faith in Jesus, worked by God's Word taught in its truth and purity. This is why teaching doctrine purely is so important.

Our Gospel text today shows how the mixing of tradition with God's Word leads to the rejection of God's Word. The Pharisees rejected Jesus because He taught God's Word in opposition to their traditions. Jesus quoted Isaiah: "**It is written, 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me; in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'**" When we hold to our traditions as superior to God's Word, we end up rejecting Jesus and the salvation that is ours only by faith in Him. Jesus saves us by faith in Him, forgiving our sins through His Holy Word and Sacraments, that is, through doctrine.

Our Church teaches the pure Word of God as unchanging truth, which, sadly, cannot be said for many other churches. Yes, we have our traditions, which must never rise to the level of doctrine, and, yes, traditions can change over time. But the "tradition" of teaching the Word of God in its truth and purity must never change. Lord, keep us steadfast in Your Word. Amen.