

“Tradition ~ Good. Traditionalism ~ Not So Much”

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Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 + James 1:22-27 = tradition vs traditionalism

It was called the six-point system in the church of Wallace Bubar's childhood. The offering envelopes had the usual line for your name. But they also had six little boxes underneath where you could put a check mark next to six actions:

- worship attended,
- Bible brought,
- Bible read daily,
- Sunday School lesson studied,
- prayed daily,
- gave an offering.

The image shows a form titled "SUNDAY SCHOOL MEMBER'S REPORT" with the following fields and checkboxes:

- Name _____ Date _____
- Class/Department _____ Offering \$ _____
- Sunday School Attendance
- Bible Brought
- Lesson Studied
- Giving
- Worship Attendance
- Daily Bible Reading and Prayer
- Visits, Number _____
- Other Contacts, Number _____

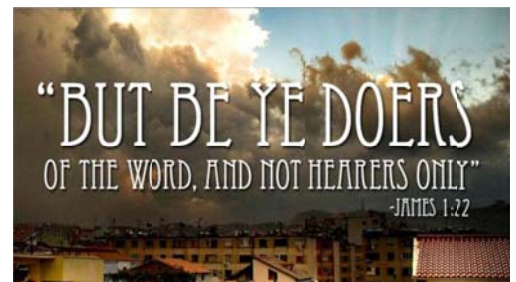


Somebody at the denominational headquarters had decided these six things were the most important to record: not the Ten Commandments, not the nine fruits of the spirit, not the eight Beatitudes nor the seven cardinal virtues. No, these were six essentials to the life of a disciple and bringing your Bible to

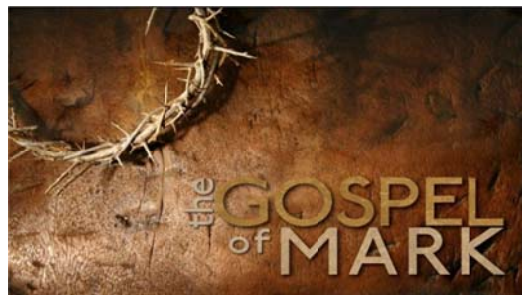
church was one of them.

“To show up at church without a Bible in hand was unthinkable. Some visitors once came to the service and sat down in front of [him]. [Bubar] whispered to [his] father, ‘Did you see that? They don’t have Bibles!’ [His father] said, “Must be Presbyterians.”

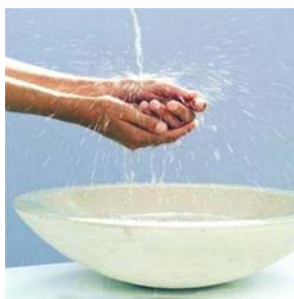
Years later as Bubar relates it, he met James in our second reading today: about being **“doers of the word and not just hearers who deceive themselves.”** Bubar says he met James in a dream and Bubar proudly displayed all those boxes with check marks in them. Six out of six! James took one look and laughed. Then James said, “I think maybe you need some different boxes there.”¹



Mark, the most succinct of all the Gospels, managed to tell the whole story of Jesus in just 16 short chapters. Somehow Mark decided to devote more than half of one of those precious chapters to a food fight ~ the food fight we visit today.²



Jesus is disputing with leaders of Israel, over the religious significance of washing hands before eating. Sounds arcane to our ears, yet this game of gotcha has nothing to do with germs or dirt, but rather is all about the traditional Jewish value placed on ritual cleanliness.



“Why do your disciples eat with unwashed hands instead of following the ancient and holy traditions?” Gotcha! This isn’t a question. It’s an accusation. The equivalent of saying “Where were you Sunday morning instead of spending it in church as God Almighty commands?” Gotcha!

Jesus’ ire is justified. Rising up to full moral indignation, he waxes eloquent: **“Oh man, did Isaiah ever have your number, you hypocrites.”**³

**“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.”**



Jesus concludes with a ringing: **“You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”** Jesus asserts

“You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

that while they may seem the same there is yet a critical, qualitative difference between humanly crafted religion and the real thing. There is religion based on God’s revealed words and there is religion based on a bunch of made-up traditions. The scribes and Pharisees with their elaborate regulations about hand washing and ritual purity are certainly representative of the latter.

Jesus point: Obedience to God trumps human rules, rituals and regulations. Obedience outperforms tradition any day.⁴

This is about more than just confusing God’s commandments with human traditions. Jesus is even more critical of moral posturing which

sidesteps the real moral demands of God altogether. Again: **“Be doers of the word and not just hearers.”**



From our text today, it is clear that Jesus would be equally incensed by Christians or political leaders they support who think the ends justify the means, who justify cruelty in the name of “national security,” who say “truth isn’t truth.”

Jesus is enraged with religious leaders who would endow our nation with such divine purpose that whatever morally outrageous policy it might create would be deemed from God.

Jesus is incensed with any who would promote policies of exclusion while touting Jesus as their guide and redeemer ~ whether on the national or personal level, whether economic, political, civil or human rights.

Equally angry with those who would wrap themselves with God’s supposed righteousness and portray greed and narcissism as God’s will. Jesus is incensed. Obedience trumps all human attempts to redefine ‘the good’ to our own advantage.

All forms of human tradition even cultures come under Jesus’ indictment. Any who claim our cultural mores are mandated by God are patently wrong.



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

— Jaroslav Pelikan —

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Jaroslav Pelikan quite rightly differentiates between ‘tradition’ and ‘traditionalism.’ He channels Jesus in Mark today when Pelikan says:

“Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.” and he adds: “it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name.”⁵

An open question: Are we honoring traditions with living faith or merely promulgating the dead faith of traditionalism?

This is just as true to our texts here today as it was a few weeks ago ~ the lost beatitude:

“Blessed are the flexible, for they shall be transformed.”





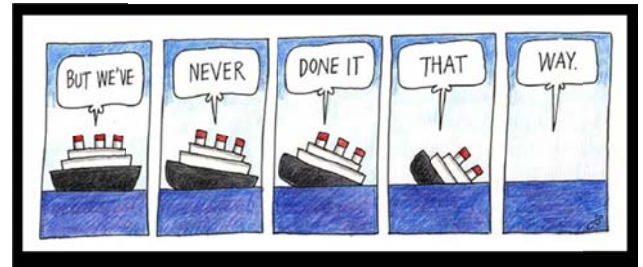
Remember Teyve in *Fiddler On The Roof* singing “*Tradition*” ~ how tradition makes life possible, that we live and breathe tradition, tradition is everything in his village. Yet the tradition was patriarchal, the Poppa making all decisions. The movie shows how that tradition had to adapt,

How do we sustain our traditions amide change, even suffering and loss?

Do we adapt by holding too tightly, blindly following tradition? Or do we, like that fiddler up at the peak of the roof, try to maintain our balance despite winds of change buffeting us ~ multi-tasking to adjust our footing while adapting to ever-changing landscapes and making exquisite, albeit altered music out of the traditions we have received?

If we are inflexible, we will fall, be broken, fail. If we can maintain our balance while all around us the world is changing and swirling, then we will not only survive but prosper.

You know the seven last words of the church. “We’ve never done it that way before!?” We at GPC, like most churches, have a lot of habits that have hardened into traditions. They become very hard to reexamine and change even when their time is long past.



Some of GPC’s traditions have outlived their positive usefulness and have become like Wallace Bubar’s offering envelopes, good traditions once but now a drag on discipleship.

Some traditions need to be allowed to expire. Which ones we keep and which ones we drop is not based on a personal choice of who has a favorite, nor based on a popularity contest, but is again a matter of spirit-led discernment of what serves God’s reign and what does not.

As we've said before. There are three kinds of people when it comes to change:

- People who resist change = Traditionalists
- People who embrace change = Adaptors
- People who initiate change = Innovators

We will be Adaptors and Innovators if we embrace change, even initiate change and not hold so tightly to our traditions that we cannot let them breathe and move and be remade, or even let go if they no longer serve the kingdom and only serve us.



Adapting traditions, updating, adjusting ~ always focused first on God's essential purpose, rather than holding to the mere rules-of-thumb we have created.

Always following God's lead ~ obedience and faithfulness, being doers and not just hearers of the word, overpowers tradition every day.

Always with an eye to Jesus' lost parable: **"Blessed are the flexible, for they shall be transformed."**

{ BLESSED
are the
FLEXIBLE }

¹ Wallace W. Bubar, "Living The Word," *Christian Century*, August 22, 2012, p. 2

² Thomas Long, "Living The Word," *Christian Century* August 25, 2009, p. 20

³ *Ibid*

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, Vol. I, p. 9