

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Proper 17
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
August 29, 2021
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9
Psalm 15
James 1:17-27
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Tradition and Its Discontents, or Pharisees and Sweet Potato Pie

As a rule, generally speaking, traditions are good things to have. Traditions provide us a sense of continuity, links to people and times that came before us, and connections to those who may come after us, those who will follow the same tradition, in part because we helped keep it going.

Traditions can be part of the so-called “ties that bind,” that create cohesion, cultivate community, and encourage collegiality.

In my own family of origin, we have a tradition of having sweet potato pie at Thanksgiving and often at Christmas as well. Never pumpkin pie. Always sweet potato pie. We always had other kinds of pies as well: cranberry, minced meat, scuppernong, and so on. But never pumpkin pie. Sweet potato not pumpkin.

There are two main reasons for picking sweet potato pie over pumpkin pie.

First, when my parents were growing up, people in our part of Georgia grew many sweet potatoes but hardly any pumpkins. The first source of origin then is availability.

Second, somewhere along the way somewhere my mother was served pumpkin pie. Pumpkin pie in which someone had perhaps added the nutmeg twice. She thought it was dreadful. One bad pumpkin pie experience was enough to put her off pumpkin pie literally for the rest of her 93.5 years. And it was also enough to lead her to institute a zero-tolerance policy on nutmeg in her house. The second source of origin, then, was personal taste. But, the never-pumpkin-always-sweet-potato-pie tradition was taught to us as children of our parents not as a matter of personal taste but as though it were some sort of violation of morals to eat pumpkin pie.

Is this overkill? Maybe. Was this really a tradition that we kept? Absolutely. Could you tell when you had somehow failed to observe this tradition? You better believe it. Just ask Becky or our niece-by-marriage Susan, also a native Texan like Becky who also grew up eating pumpkin pie.

Becky and Susan both like sweet potato pie well enough. But their holiday traditions in their families of origin included pumpkin pie. Who can blame them for wanting to have their preferred pie at holiday gatherings? Each of them at different times brought pumpkin pie as a

contribution to a holiday meal hosted by my Mom at her always-sweet-potato-never-pumpkin, zero-tolerance-policy-on-nutmeg house. Oops. Violation. Reaction. Criticism. Rejection.

My siblings and I could have told them what would happen. That tradition of our elders was engrained in us. We didn't even have to think about it. We perhaps didn't realize how deeply held it was until someone didn't observe it.

To paraphrase the parenthetical portion of today's gospel: "For the Motes, and all the Elliotts, do not eat pumpkin pie unless they are visiting outside their home county, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything at the family homeplace unless their mama said it was okay; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the use of pepper sauce, the pickling of cucumbers using garlic, and the making of cornbread without sugar."

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Sometimes traditions take on lives of their own. Something that began because of a felt need at a particular time can be passed down and revered as though critically important and sacred—or as the only correct way to do something.

Sometimes traditions observed so strictly do no harm; if anything, they are just interesting customs or preoccupations or even avocations such as the highly ritualized tea ceremony in China, Korea, and Japan or the very specific *waza* and *kata* of various martial arts.

But sometimes "the ties that bind" become the ties that choke. And sometimes traditions that began as ways to demonstrate respect calcify into rigid expectations and requirements.

Sometimes a tradition begun to show reverence for life begins to choke the life out of people for whom continuing it is unnecessarily burdensome and perhaps also pointless.

The people who uphold such traditions may scrupulously judge one another regarding how perfectly they observe the practices or protocols. The people who don't uphold such traditions may respect those who do or scoff at them or be amused by them or have no opinion whatsoever because they don't even know that the tradition exists.

People of good will and good faith can genuinely and agreeably disagree with one another about the value of such traditions or the requirements to practice or continue such traditions. But if any party allows their practices of choice to become calcified and their hearts to be hardened toward other positions, a brittleness of spirit and fractiousness of interaction often results.

This is what Jesus encounters in today's gospel: criticism from people who seem to have made minor observances as important as the ten commandments.

“The Pharisees and all the Jews,” our English translation says, observe many, many things. Who were “the Pharisees and all the Jews”? Let’s start with “all the Jews” in air quotes. A better rendering into English would be “the most prominent leaders of the religious establishment.” This inadequate and unexplained classifying of “all the Jews” as if the phrase referred to every Jewish person of the first century has been used as a justification for deep-seated and insidious anti-Semitism through the centuries.

If “all the Jews” really meant *all* the Jews, that would be a group that included Jesus, the twelve core male disciples, the women disciples who supported Jesus’ ministry, and the vast majority of all the characters we encounter in the gospels. So, “all the Jews” here means the super-elevated insider leaders of the religious establishment.

Next: “the Pharisees.” The Pharisees were kind of a religious sect within Judaism, kind of a political group, kind of a school of thought, and kind of a social movement. They have gotten a bad rap over the centuries. We have turned their name into an adjective in English that is a synonym of *hypocritical*.

Yet the Pharisees—a name given to them by others—were keepers of the oral tradition. They most likely had their origins as a group or movement during the centuries when the Jewish people were exiles in Babylon. They helped devise a way to worship and study and remain faithful to God as Jews while the Jewish people were nowhere near the temple in Jerusalem that was the center of their religious practices. Because of them, the synagogue movement and what we now recognize as rabbinic Judaism got traction and emerged.

Jesus doesn’t dislike the Pharisees as people or as fellow Jews. He dislikes and feels constricted by their insistence that their choices for themselves should be everyone’s choices. He dislikes their imposition of their own views upon others and their evaluation of others based on their own criteria.

Elsewhere Jesus holds the Pharisees up as models of people who are seriously concerned with righteousness, that is, right relating; and he says that unless the righteousness of his followers exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees then we aren’t properly measuring up.

Jesus’ critique of the Pharisees is really that they are majoring on the minors and minoring on the majors. Do you know what I mean? Too much emphasis on things of lesser consequence and not enough concern about the core values at the very heart of the tradition.

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The second reading from the epistle of James tells us that we should be super-observant and decidedly diligent about things that really matter. Worthless religion and religious behaviors are those that inhibit human growth and flourishing and cause needless destruction of things

that are of value. Worthwhile religion and religious behaviors are those that support and encourage human growth and flourishing and exhibit our care for all of creation.

Don't just listen to what the right things are, says James, do the right things. Listen more; talk less. Don't get so angry about stuff that doesn't matter. Care for widows and orphans, the folks who can't take care of themselves.

This is in alignment with the first reading from Deuteronomy. The laws given by God to Moses to regulate the life of the people of Israel were designed to give life. The commandment of God was not to add to or take away from those life-giving laws.

“But take care and watch yourselves closely,…” Deuteronomy says: don't add or take away. The law as given to Moses strikes a balance between the individual and the community, between the individual and God, between the community and God, and so on. Maintain the balance. Let the laws of God be an instrument of life.

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Today Jesus winds up his teaching by using the emphasis of the Pharisees and some of the religious leaders on external observances as the foil to his admonition that it's the stuff that comes out of us, the fruits of evil intentions, that should be of greater concern than proper execution of ritual details or the preferences of personal taste.

It's easy to become preoccupied with little things, though, with externalities. In part this happens because we can control little things and small details. This is comforting at times in the midst of world moving so fast, a world with so much unnecessary violence and so many needless deaths.

Yet Jesus the Christ invites us not so much to believe things about him as to follow him and live his life: to major on the majors; to devote ourselves to the pursuit of the things that truly matter; to find a balance between our lives as individuals and our lives as members of communities and congregations.

In the words of Henri-Frédéric Amiel, a Swiss author of the nineteenth century:

“Life is short. And we have little time to gladden the hearts of those who walk this way with us. So, be swift to love and make haste to be kind.”