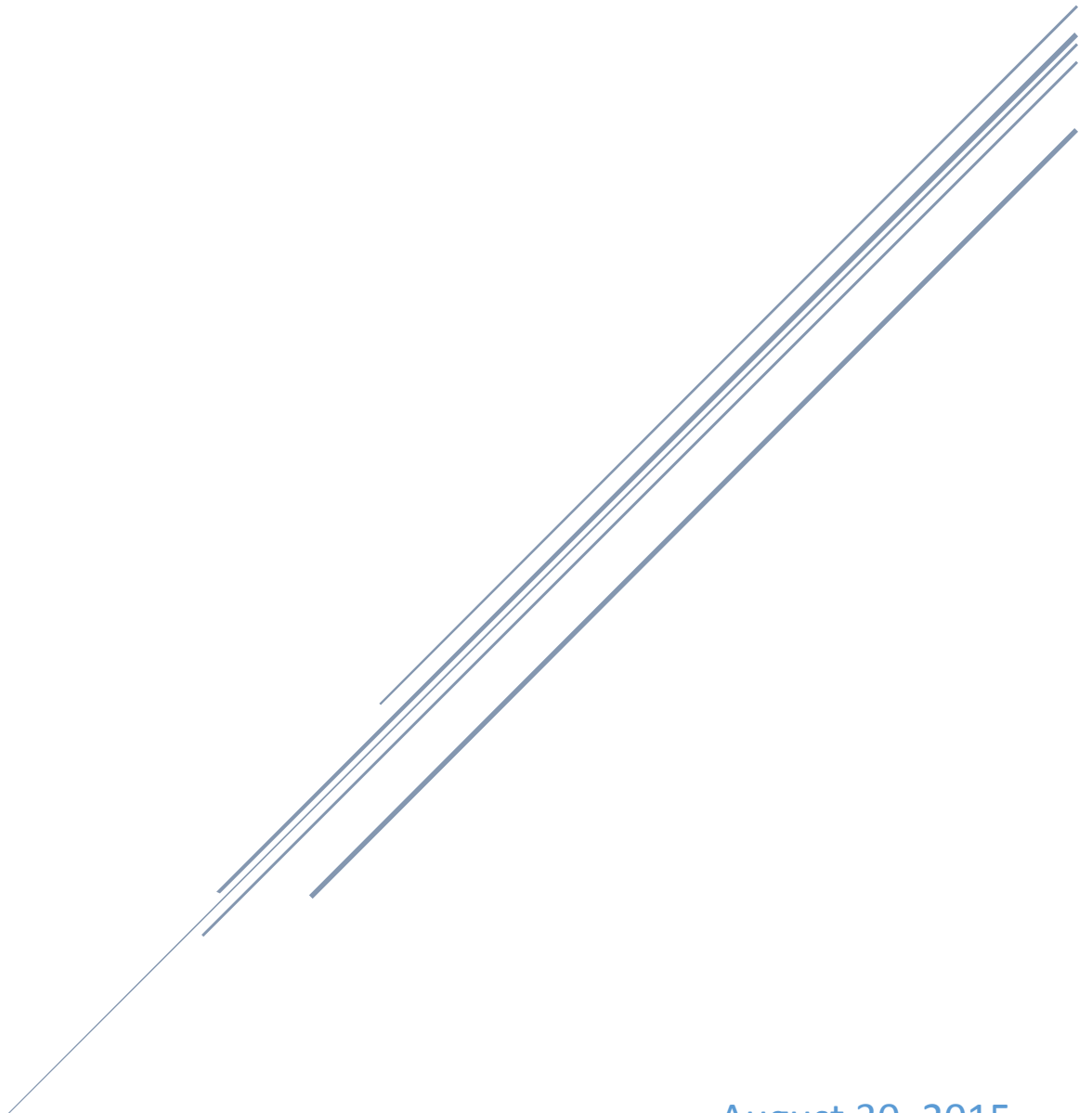


# OUCH! IS HE TALKING TO ME?

*Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23*



August 30, 2015  
Pastor Brad

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

Ouch! Is he talking to me? ‘Cuz you know, Jesus is usually talking not just to the disciples, but to “the crowds” as well -- and to the Pharisees – and to us. Am I -- Are we -- the Pharisees? With whom shall we identify in this week’s passage?

After reading this passage I was all set to talk about republicans and democrats and people who like to call themselves Christians but don’t seem too keen to help the poor, heal the sick, feed the hungry, welcome the alien, or any of those other traditions we Christians are supposed to be famous for. This would be the perfect text for a sermon like that, and I was inspired – at first. But the more I read the passage the less I wanted to discuss specific traditions and the more I wanted to look at tradition itself.

Defiance Theatre is doing *Fiddler on the Roof* this fall. The main character is named Tevye. Now Tevye had three daughters and the local “matchmaker” made matches for the first two marriages. But Tevye’s third daughter, Chava, defies tradition and falls in love with a young Bolshevik. This is too much for Tevye. He could only bend so far and then he would break. For Chava to marry a Bolshevik without his blessing, was a violation of his tradition, of the way he thought and acted and lived. So his daughter was ostracized and Tevye instructed the family to consider Chava dead.

At the very end of the story, the revolution was starting in Russia, and the Jews, including Tevye and Golda, were fleeing to America. This historic Jewish family was being fractured, never to see each other again. And then comes the last scene, the most touching scene of the whole movie. The whole family said good-bye to each other, and suddenly Chava and her Bolshevik husband come forward, to say the last goodbye to her father. And maybe, just maybe, to be blessed by him. Maybe, just maybe, to be at peace with the man she loved so deeply.

Tevye was stuck. What should he do? He had vowed that Chava was dead to him, that he would never speak to her again, and now he was stuck. And he needed to say goodbye to that daughter. Finally, in despair, Tevye turns his back on his daughter. He turns away from her, and he bends over the fence in grief, a broken man. No blessing, no peace, and the story ends tragically.

In today’s passage, we’ve come back to the Gospel of Mark, landing right in the middle of a discussion that feels kinda familiar. I think anyone who has kids -- and even those of us who don’t but have been lucky enough to hang out with them for any time at all have heard this argument – and probably participated in it. The one about washing your hands before dinner. I’ve seen it around family dinners, at youth groups. At camp I felt like my mother, “Did you wash your hands?” Or nowadays it’s, “Did you sanitize?” as you try to squirt Purell on 35 pairs of dirty hands stampeding in to dinner. Before we say the blessing we have to wash our hands.

Now, that certainly can't be what this passage is about – an argument about washing your hands before eating? That drama that I'm sure we've all been witness to at some point or other – children or not! Well, it is, and it isn't. As with many of these arguments, there's often more going on than meets the eye.

With kids, maybe they just forgot. Ok... But maybe they've decided that even though Mom & Dad think this handwashing business is important, they do not – and while we're at it, maybe we're tired of all those other rules you make up to harass us! I mean, maybe not washing their hands is not so much about forgetfulness, but more about testing the parents' authority. Hmmm...

The same thing is happening here. It's not really about handwashing. It's about tradition and the authority behind the practice. That's why the Pharisees ask Jesus, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders?" They're aghast at the implications of Jesus and his disciples running roughshod over their traditions. Just who does Jesus think he is, anyway?

On a side note, I can't help but think about dirty hands. Dirty hands are working hands – poor hands that've been out in the field, casting huge fishing nets, feeding thousands, walking miles a day to watch and learn and do the things that Jesus was teaching. We don't know where they were eating, but why wasn't water provided? Could this have been a set up from the beginning?

It's not just about authority either. It's about authority linked to behavior – the everyday decisions we make regarding how we treat each other. This is why Jesus throws the Pharisees "Tradition of the elders" right back in their faces:

*"You want to talk about tradition? I got your traditions... What about that tradition – commandment, in fact – to honor your parents? Seems pretty simple to me, but you Pharisees found a religious loop-hole so you can declare all your wealth to be an offering to God! That way you don't have to take care of your parents!"* Jesus is pretty hard on these guys.

You see Jesus is challenging the Pharisees to look and see if their traditions help them to fulfill their mission to God – or not. That's what today's message is really about.

Ok – so we don't seem as picky about our traditions as the Pharisees, but what if someone were to suggest tinkering with some our traditions? Changing the order of worship in order to make the sacred more accessible? How about reconfiguring the pews. Kind of have some rows over her and some over there – sort a worship in the round? Make it a little more conversational...? Or getting rid of them all together? What if every fourth Sunday we didn't have church here, but went out into the community to serve our neighbors? What if...?

I think you get the idea. We all have traditions – churches, businesses, families – and they're more than just traditions. They're markers – symbols of what's accepted by the group – what's right and wrong -- giving us a much-needed sense of history and stability.

Never mind the fact that traditions DO change over time – we just want them to SEEM like they never change.

This passage serves two purposes: it asks us to rethink our traditions. Should we really hold them sacred? And it pushes us to think about how our concern of the law – our traditions – help us care for one another.

The people Mark is writing for are Jewish – they know the rules -- but He intentionally gives us that list: "...the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders. And they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles." Mark almost seems to be making fun of the Jews in this passage.

But couldn't we take this occasion to look at some of our own practices to see if they've become more important than our mission? How's it go?

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This is a great opportunity to start to think about just how much we would be willing to change in order to reach a new generation. And, more importantly, what are we NOT willing to change.

What tradition might we have that's so important that no matter whether it helps us achieve our mission or not, it preserves some sense of order and of our place in the world – shoring up our identity and, therefore, can never be touched?

As well as being something important to keep in mind whenever we look toward the future, what a fascinating conversation this could be – not only among ourselves, but with those who don't have a church home, or who've stopped coming. What might we need to change? We could ask our kids, our neighbors, our co-workers. What might we need to change to make our worship more accessible – more useful?

When speaking about faith traditions, Retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong says, "...I honor my tradition, I walk through my tradition, but I don't think my tradition defines God, I think it only points me to God." How might we make our traditions point to God more effectively?

Of course, it's never easy. You' may have heard the old joke, "how many Methodists does it take to change a light bulb?"

"Change? Change? My grandfather donated that light bulb!"

We love our traditions. I love our traditions. There'd be no UMC without it. Tradition is one of the 4 sides of the Wesleyan quadrilateral. That's the fancy name for the four features on which we Methodists base our faith: Scripture, tradition, reason, and

experience. Traditions are important. They help us to understand our faith and heighten our experience with the holy in countless ways. But what if they're not doing that for everyone?

I believe that Jesus is calling us – and has been – to put our mission – whether it's caring for our aging parents, feeding the hungry, visiting the prisoner, opening our doors to the homeless, offering our building for after school tutoring, the list goes on and on – to put our mission ahead of even our most cherished traditions? What then? Are we up for whatever the spirit may call us to do?

I may have told this story before, but this one's worth a second telling. Once upon a time, there was a family gathering for Easter or Christmas or thanksgiving or something – it doesn't matter -- and they were blessed to have four generations of women helping prepare Easter dinner. The youngest, a little girl of about 6 or so, excited to be helping her mother and grandma and great-grandma in the kitchen for the first time, asked her mother, "Mommy, why do you cut the ends off the ham before putting it in the pan?"

"I don't know," replied the mother, "That's how my mother always did it. Let's ask grandma."

So the little girl and her mother went to the grandmother and asked her, "Mom (we called my grandmother 'Mom' – they were always 'Mom & Pop'), why do we always cut the ends off the ham before we put it in the oven?"

"That's a good question, honey – I'm not sure. I guess that's how my mother always did it. Let's ask G-ma."

And so the three of them all cornered the poor great grandmother, and asked her, "Why do you always cut the ends off the ham before cooking it?"

The older woman looked at them and answered, "'Cuz it wouldn't fit in the pan."

In the reading from James today, we heard: "A religion that is pure and undefiled is this, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and keep oneself unstained."

What I am trying to say is that Jesus still loves us in spite of our sinfulness, our selfishness, and our attempts to stop change by clinging to tradition. Jesus will never stop loving us. But I do think that Jesus of Nazareth was right – profoundly so -- when he suggested that the people of God love doing their religious traditions more than living God's commandments -- the commandments of love, mercy, and justice in a world filled with misery.

Did you ever see, "Fiddler on the Roof?" It's a great show. It's about a man named Tevye, who dearly loved his traditions.....too much. Amen.