

Easy Out

September 1, 2024

The Appeal to Tradition

One of the added perks of doing my undergrad in philosophy was that the people, both the professors and students, were...interesting. I mean, c'mon – if someone is going to dedicate their study and teaching to the love of wisdom, they're inevitably going to be, at minimum, quirky.

Over the years, I've stayed in touch with a couple of the folks from that program, and today's scripture readings remind me of a visit I had with one of my classmates. It was probably a decade after we graduated, and he and his wife had just welcomed their first baby. They were showing me her nursery, and I actually burst out laughing. There, blown up and framed on the wall, was the page from one of our textbooks that showed a chart of logical fallacies.

Did I mention the baby wasn't even a month old?

As a parent of a preschooler, let me tell you that I think of that chart a lot. I've worked soooooo hard to answer her questions accurately. There's no "thunder is the angels bowling in heaven" kind of answer in our house. No, we call her Fairy Science Mother, who is really one of my high school friends who is a professor in the biology department at the University of Montana, who will explain that thunder happens when warmer and colder air masses crash into one another.

But friends, it's hard not to devolve into fallacies while parenting. She'll ask, "Why is that car blue?" and after the 47th time, I'll exhaustedly drop into the logical fallacy of circular logic and say, "Because it's blue." What's hardest for me here is that sometimes that satisfies her. Or, she'll ask, "Why do we have to go to Grandma's for Thanksgiving?" and rather than processing about social constructs and familial expectations with a three year old, I'll devolve into the logical fallacy of the appeal to tradition and say, "Because that's what we do." Don't get me started on the appeal to authority fallacy.

The first time I heard myself say, "Because I'm the mom, that's why," I think I buried my face in a pillow and cried for three days as I imagined Bob Vanden Burght, my academic advisor from my philosophy program, lighting my diploma on fire as he shook his head dejectedly and murmured, "We taught you nothing."

The Scriptures

All of this comes to mind this week as we read a story from the Gospel of Mark in which the Pharisees critique Jesus because his disciples don't wash their hands. First off – it's not about washing hands. For modern readers, we think, "Ewww! They weren't washing their hands or their food after they brought it home from the market? No wonder life expectancy was so short."

But the Pharisees weren't criticizing the disciples about their hygiene, they were criticizing that the disciples weren't engaging in the traditional religious purification rights for both handwashing and food. So, on two levels, this argument isn't about handwashing.

As a quick aside, when someone is trying to trip you up, the real argument is never about what they're actually arguing. (That's not philosophy, that's psychology.) When a bully or an adversary or even a partner or friend is arguing with you and trying to trip you up, the content of

their argument is never what's really important. It's about winning, it's about power dynamics. But I digress.

What's going on in Mark 7 is that Jesus is starting to interact with non-Jewish people, is "breaking yet another barrier to belonging," and is starting to make it clear "that discipleship is much more involved than following tradition."

(Rev. Dr. Chelsey Harmon)

The Pharisees engage the logical fallacy of the appeal to tradition, and Jesus isn't having it. When he quotes from the Prophet Isaiah, "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 is reminding the Pharisees that our religious traditions and elders haven't always gotten things right. In fact, over time, religious authorities and traditions have a pretty bad track record.

When it comes to behaving in Godly ways, following the letter of the law, whether around cleanliness and what defiles us vs. what keeps us "pure," or around who is worthy to be "in" and who is unworthy and therefore "out" has all too often borne rotten fruit. The message that Jesus quotes from Isaiah is basically pointing out that living in a Godly way takes more than simply engaging in pious behaviors.

In the late '80s I devoured all of the gangster books that were coming out. I don't remember if it was in "The Godfather" or "Goodfellas" or another one, but in one of the books there was a character who was a mobster who went to mass every day. The implication was that, because he engaged in this ritual religious practice, he was somehow living a Godly life, despite those pesky little murders he ordered and extortion he engaged in.

Our Gospel today is telling us that living a Godly life is more than going through the motions. What's in our hearts matters. "If we're only sticking to the tradition, then we're never getting to the heart level." As your pastor, I'd much rather you be kind than follow the rules. I'd much rather you be compassionate and generous than be here.

But actually, I do want you here, too, because I hope that what we're doing here is more than mere ritual. I hope that what we're doing here, worshipping and thanking God and being in community with one another, does in some way shape our hearts.

The Rev. Dr. Chelsey Harmon helps us understand why Jesus says ritual and tradition are not enough. She writes:

"When tradition is appealed to, we can fool ourselves into thinking that we are not responsible. After all, we didn't come up with the tradition, we're just following it. Plus, we don't have to think about why we are eager to follow the tradition (and what vices or prejudices might be motivating us), we just have to do what we've always done."

What's more, Rev. Dr. Harmon explains how it is that so many actively religious people have behaved so abominably contrary to God's ways so frequently throughout human history.

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Let's shift gears for a moment and look at our first reading which David read for us today. It comes from the Letter of James, which Martin Luther didn't think should be part of the Bible because, as we read today, it talks about the importance of doing good works, and thus he thought it undermined his theology that we are saved only by grace, not by our own behaviors.

But Martin Luther was being too simplistic. The school of thought that I subscribe to says that rather than suggesting that our behaviors buy us salvation, our works, our deeds, indeed how we live is a result of being steeped in God's ways. James admonishes us to “be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves” not to gain our way into heaven, but rather that how we behave is indicative of the state of our hearts. Thus he writes, “If any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.” Our religion is worthless if we hear of God's ways but then don't lend our energy toward making them a reality.

Conclusion

Friends, it's easy to just fall into an easy faith based on tradition. We celebrate Communion in this certain way because that's what our ancestors did. You don't wear shorts or bring coffee into church because you were taught that is disrespectful, and then you judge those who do. You follow the rules and obey the tradition as a way of living your religion and if others don't then they're on the outside. But a life following Jesus is so much more than this.

One of the great lines in “Fiddler on the Roof” is “because of our traditions, every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do.” That's good, but it's only half of the truth, or maybe it's one third. Tradition can be important, but only when coupled with love and action. Any time tradition and love come into conflict, the Godly winner will always be love. And love that isn't put into action is, as I Corinthians tells us, just a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal – worthless of its own accord. Observing tradition for the sake of tradition is simply an easy out – it doesn't have body, it doesn't have soul.

I started out laughing about my friend's poster of logical fallacies in his newborn daughter's nursery, but our scriptures today remind us of the importance of holding up even our most deeply held traditions to the law of love. In the end, today's sermon could have been just one sentence, quoted from our passage from James: “be doers of the word, not just hearers.”

Be doers of the word. When we do, it won't matter whether our traditions are robust and heartfelt or simply motions that we go through. It won't matter that the appeal to tradition is a logical fallacy. Because when we are practitioners of God's ways, love will abound, and that is always a good thing.

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