

# Apostles Anglican Church

*The Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost*

1 September 2024

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Main Text: Mark 7:1–23

Supporting Text: See footnotes

Title: Tradition > Traditionalism

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Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, you gave your Apostles grace truly to believe and to preach your word: Grant that we might love what they believed and preach what they taught through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

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## Introduction

I grew up the son of a pastor in a small independent, Pentecostal church in northeast Ohio. My dad would often jokingly say “traditionally were nontraditional.” He was right for the most part, but we did have a few traditions.

## Communion

We had communion once a month on a Sunday morning. My dad even wrote a short liturgy from the Gospel of John and said what we call “the words of institution.” “This is my body, do this in remembrance of me. This is my blood, do this in remembrance of me.”

## Advent Wreath

We had a liturgy for lighting the candles on the Advent wreath. One family a week would come forward and read a scripture and a short devotional dad had written, and then they would light the candle

for the week. Frankly, I'm not sure how my dad knew about the Advent wreath, but we had one.

### **Maundy Thursday**

We also had a Maundy Thursday service, which I have never seen in any other Pentecostal church. This service was really meaningful to me and I looked forward to it every year. We would move all the pews to the side of the sanctuary (what we call the nave) and set up 8-foot tables in the shape of a cross in the center of the church. Then we would have communion, and afterward, we would nail our prayers to a large wooden cross set up in the altar area.

### **Transition**

These services or traditions made a powerful impression on me. Years later, after becoming part of the Anglican Church, Dad asked me why I became Anglican. I thought about it for a minute, and I told him, among other things, that one of the main draws for me was the importance the church placed on tradition. He followed up my answer by asking why that was so important to me. I told him all the traditional things we did as a church when I was growing up were meaningful to me and formed me deeply. I wanted that all the time. I like to joke with Dad that it's kinda his fault I became an Anglican.

I love tradition! I love the nuances that come along with it. I love the depth and richness it creates. I love how our tradition honors the Gospel and points to the Word Made Flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord. Its meaning gives us meaning.

So, what am I and what are you, sitting in the pews of a church that places a high value on the traditions passed down to us from the early church and beyond; what are we to do with today's passage from the Gospel of St. John?

Here, Jesus says to the scribes and Pharisees,  
“You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”

The issue at hand (pun intended) is the ritual washing of hands by the Pharisees and other Jews of the time. This shouldn't be confused with the common washing of hands before a meal. The Pharisees taught that the ritual washing that was required of the priest in the temple should also be done before meals by everyone, not just the priest.

Biblical historians Paul Robertson and Douglas Estes write,

*“Typically, the Pharisees are seen as religious and social innovators whose adaptive readings [or interpretations] of the Torah [led to] the codification of oral tradition.”<sup>1</sup>*

This oral tradition or oral law was extensive. Thousands and thousands of these traditions or laws were handed down to the Jewish people.

When I was 11 or so, we had a Jewish missionary couple staying at our house. At dinner one night, the husband explained the worldview of practicing Jews in Israel. He said it's like this, they say,

*“God planted a tree and said don't touch the tree. The religious leaders erected a fence around the tree to protect people so they wouldn't accidentally touch it. The problem arises when they say, ‘God said don't touch the fence.’ And that's bad enough, but they keep building fences and saying, ‘God said not to touch the fence.’”*

Pretty soon you have a tree with 250 fences around it.

In Jesus' day, each Rabbi had his own set of oral traditions, referred to as his “yoke.” This was intended to guide his students into properly understanding and practicing their faith. But the number of these

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Robertson and Douglas Estes, “Pharisees, Critical Issues,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

commandments was so great that it became too heavy of a burden for anyone to bear. This is why Jesus says, “Come unto me for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”<sup>2</sup>

The scribes and Pharisees had lost track of the heart of the matter and imposed their own laws on others.

Jesus says to them,

*“Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the Commandments of men.”*

Jesus goes on to say that they not only teach as “*doctrines the Commandments of men,*” but they also use their teachings to get out of following the actual commandments of God.

In verse 9, Jesus gives an example of how they do this. He says,

*“You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (that is, given to God)— then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.”*

There are many issues for the Pharisees here; for the sake of time, I will highlight just two.

First, speaking as if for God, they teach and require things of the people that God does not require or even want of his people. Their motives may have been good initially, but now their teachings harm people. We get

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 11:28-30

into hot water when we add requirements beyond what God requires, and we start to hurt people by placing heavy burdens on them. This is why Article 6 of our Articles of Faith is so important. Article 6 says in part:

*“Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any [person].”<sup>3</sup>*

Second, they seek to control and manipulate God by using His commandments against Him. This is represented here by Jesus's example of the Pharisees' teaching of paying your way out of honoring your father and mother. It's also seen in other places in the Gospels. In John chapter 8, the story of the woman caught in adultery. Where's the man caught in adultery? It takes two to tango, so where is he? Did he get a “Get Out of Jail Free” card? It would seem that their traditions somehow let the man off the hook.

This is different from the tradition we value so highly. It is the dead faith, not the living faith, passed down to us by our Christian ancestors. You see, tradition always points to something. A tradition that kills points to the self. It places the work of keeping the law on the individual. It creates a system of rules in which I can find loopholes. Unfaithful tradition can be wielded as a weapon to cut and hurt others. This is not the tradition we advocate for, and this is the kind of tradition Jesus condemns in our Gospel passage.

The historian and theologian Jaroslav (Yar-a-slav / Pel I can) Pelikan wrote,

*“Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name.”<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> ACNA Book of Common Prayer 2019, Article 6.

<sup>4</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition: The 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities*

In contrast to unfaithful tradition, a living and faithful tradition points to Christ and His salvation of the world. It brings life and health. It can be wielded, but instead of a weapon, it's wielded as a scalpel to heal the sick.

As Anglicans, the traditions we hold so dearly are, first and foremost, the Sacraments: the Eucharist and Baptism. In these two acts, Christ has promised to be present to us in a real, unique, and special way. The Sacraments are primary to us because, unlike other traditions, they don't simply point to Christ; they include Christ, so they get top billing.

We also highly value the Creeds and Apostolic succession (or the passing down of ordinations from Bishop to Bishop). We value these so highly because the creeds contain and bishops protect the Church's historic faith.

We value the tradition of our historic practices, namely the Eucharistic Service, The Daily Offices of prayer and scripture reading, and other special services. We value this tradition because we want to worship in the same way as the Early Church did.

We have many other minor traditions you will often see during services or even as you walk the halls of our Church. These are too numerous to name, so I will say just a few things. If you see something in the service you don't understand, ask yourself, "How is this thing (bowing to the cross, for example) pointing to Christ? How could it produce a living faith in me and in others? And if you can't spot it, ask someone—a deacon, a priest, or someone who seems particularly devout to that tradition. When it comes to bowing, kneeling, crossing yourself, and other similar practices, please remember this: None must; all may, and some should do these practices.

This is the tradition we embrace—a living and historical faith. We believe that our tradition, when practiced as in this way will bring life

and spiritual health not simply by the doing of them but because of the one they point to.

Looking back momentarily at our reading from John, it would seem that the Pharisees were concerned about Jesus' disciples being "unclean" or "defiled."

But Jesus flips the script on what it means to be "unclean." He says:

*"Hear me, all of you, and understand: There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him." And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" . . . And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts . . . and they defile a person."*

The Pharisees had studied the Torah, taking it into their minds. But what came out of them was burdensome on the Jewish people. They endeavored to find loopholes in the laws of God instead of seeing God's good laws as life and health.

Death, hardship, and injustice came out of their oral tradition.

That's what defiles a person, Jesus says.

A tradition that revolves around me, that points to me, ALWAYS leads to an outcome of defilement of the heart.

On the other hand, good, healthy, and Godly traditions always revolve around Christ; they always point to Christ, and they always bring about the fullness of life and spiritual health.

I asked at the beginning of this sermon:

What are we to do with the words of Christ found in today's Gospel passage?

Some in the Church world would answer that by saying, “We must renounce tradition and embrace Jesus.” I appreciate the spirit with which they say this, but I can not imagine someone suggesting that I should renounce my marriage and embrace Jennifer.

Instead, we should denounce bad traditions that point us away from Jesus and embrace the traditions that point toward him—the traditions passed down to us by our mothers and fathers in Faith. This is what we should do with Christ's words found in today's Gospel.

Amen.