

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

August 22, 2021

Psalm 14:1–7 (ESV):

1 The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.”

They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds;
there is none who does good.

2 The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man,
to see if there are any who understand,
who seek after God.

3 They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt;
there is none who does good,
not even one.

4 Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers
who eat up my people as they eat bread
and do not call upon the LORD?

5 There they are in great terror,
for God is with the generation of the righteous.

6 You would shame the plans of the poor,
but the LORD is his refuge.

7 Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!
When the LORD restores the fortunes of his people,
let Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad.

First Reading: Isaiah 29:11–19 (ESV):

11 And the vision of all this has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed.
When men give it to one who can read, saying, “Read this,” he says, “I cannot, for it is

sealed.” 12 And when they give the book to one who cannot read, saying, “Read this,” he says, “I cannot read.”

13 And the Lord said:

“Because this people draw near with their mouth
and honor me with their lips,
while their hearts are far from me,
and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men,
14 therefore, behold, I will again
do wonderful things with this people,
with wonder upon wonder;
and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish,
and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.”

15 Ah, you who hide deep from the LORD your counsel,
whose deeds are in the dark,
and who say, “Who sees us? Who knows us?”

16 You turn things upside down!
Shall the potter be regarded as the clay,
that the thing made should say of its maker,
“He did not make me”;
or the thing formed say of him who formed it,
“He has no understanding”?

17 Is it not yet a very little while
until Lebanon shall be turned into a fruitful field,
and the fruitful field shall be regarded as a forest?

18 In that day the deaf shall hear
the words of a book,
and out of their gloom and darkness
the eyes of the blind shall see.

19 The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD,
and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.

EPISTLE: Ephesians 5:22–33 (ESV):

Wives and Husbands

22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. 28 In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, 30 because we are members of his body. 31 “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” 32 This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. 33 However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

THE GOSPEL - Mark 7:1–13 (ESV):

7 Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, 2 they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. 3 (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, 4 and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) 5 And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “**Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?**” 6 And he said to them, “**Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written,**

“ **This people honors me with their lips,**

but their heart is far from me;
7 in vain do they worship me,
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'

8 You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”

9 And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! 10 For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ 11 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)— 12 then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, 13 thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.”

Sermon 34 – Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

“Trad Rock”

Mark 7:1-14

Dear friends,

On to Mark for today, and Jesus has some words to say to us about traditions, habits. A tradition, so we're clear, is something we do as a church that has not been commanded. The Ten Commandments are not a tradition, they are law, God's Law. We have to do them whether we like it or not. A tradition is optional, it does not have to be done, but it also does not have to be not done either. It's up to us whether we do it or not. Jesus highlights some of the pitfalls of tradition. The example he uses is a little weird but we'll get to that. Lutherans have a bunch of traditions, and while I can't talk about them all, I do want to discuss what their place is. What our attitude is. We do many things that the Bible has not told us to do. Is this a bad thing? I don't think so, though some might say so.

The chapters before this don't really have a lot to tell us. It is just Jesus doing what Jesus does, preaching, teaching, healing, and so forth. He is demonstrated He is the Son

of God through these things, He has authority, He can challenge this, He can question it. We're not anarchists, tearing things down for the fun of it, but we are not strict authoritarians either, doing things the way its been done for the sake of doing it the way its been done. Jesus demonstrates this, and He will go on to say it in our Gospel lesson.

I'm going to start at verse 5. Mark summarizes some of the typical Jewish traditions, and the Pharisees object. **“5 And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” 6 And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me;7 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ 8 You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”**

This condemnation seems to come out of nowhere, but Jesus has a way of cutting right to the heart of the matter in Mark. There is something a little absurd about this, Jesus is healing diseases, doing miracles, and the Pharisees are busy kind of nitpicking him. But the heart of the objection comes from Isaiah's words, and Jesus summarizes it nicely. The Pharisees aren't walking the talk. They're honoring God with their lips but not their deeds. This is something we are all in danger of, just kinda rattling off the Christian faith and not doing anything about it. To us, this is fairly obvious and straightforward, we get the concept. But imagine how this sounds to a Pharisee to have someone say this about them.

The Pharisees were all about what you did, they spent all their time trying to teach and help people understand what the right thing to do was. That was their job. They had the Old Testament, and Jews wanted someone to help them understand how do I be a good Jew while I'm trying to live my life and earn a living? The Pharisees thought they were the last ones on earth to be neglecting the things of God, they made their money by teaching people about the things of God. So you're a Pharisee who has spent twenty years

helping people understand the Old Testament and the various Jewish laws, and now this guy says that you don't walk the talk.

Why does Jesus say this? Obviously it's true, Jesus cannot lie, but what you need to understand is the sin of the Pharisees, and we'll use this as our springboard to talk about tradition. The Pharisees started by helping good Jews try to be good Jews during the exile in Babylon. They lived in the midst of a Gentile nation and it was hard to be a good Jew when the police and the judges and the businessmen were all Gentiles. The Pharisees eventually started making lists, writing down some of the things they had decided over the years, so it would be easy for people to understand. Over time, the Pharisees went from helping people understand the Old Testament to having people read their own books or their own lists or their own rules instead. Again, this took a lot of time, but it eventually happened. Imagine you went to me for advice, and instead of telling you something from the Bible, I told you to buy my book instead. That's kinda what they were doing. People started to confuse what was really in the Old Testament with the things the Pharisees said. These traditions that Jesus is talking about were getting in the way of what God actually told the Jews to do. That is why Jesus says what He does.

We have a phrase for what the Pharisees were doing. They were making majors out of minors, mountains out of molehills. They were fighting the little battles too hard. Washing hands is nice for sanitary purposes but it is absolutely not the point of what God was commanding in the Old Testament. The Pharisees forgot that in their rush to be helpful, and their egos turned them more toward their own thoughts rather than God's Word. That is a danger for all of us. Traditions are easy, and man-made things make sense. We like them for that reason. But traditions, man-made things, are not God. They aren't what He says. Jesus gives another example in the next verses when He talks about the Corban thing. God wanted people to honor and love their parents. The Pharisees were letting people take the money that they normally used to support their parents financially and give it to the synagogue, in fact, they approved of this.

If that sounds weird, kind of gross, and really unnecessary, that's because it is. Imagine taking the money that you used to pay for nursing homes and putting it in the offering plate instead. Why would you do that? I don't know, but it explains pretty well what happens when we focus too much on man-made things and not God. You get neglect, you get suffering, when that happens, because the Commandments are there to set our priorities straight. God first, neighbor second, me last. That's what the Commandments teach us.

Some Christians try to avoid this by getting rid of all traditions, getting rid of anything man-made, but that's kind of impossible. What worked for the church during the 1st century doesn't always work for us, simply because society and technology have changed so much. If we were to take that attitude to an extreme, we would have to get rid of our organ, this microphone, our pulpit, and build this church out of untreated wood. That's silly and not the point, and you know that. We Lutherans keep the traditions that are helpful, and we try to minimize or get rid of the ones that aren't helpful.

There's a few questions I ask myself when it comes to what we do as a church and in church. How is this helping me understand/appreciate what Jesus has done for me? That's what our traditions should do, they should help us understand and appreciate Jesus. This is why we worship the way we do, because it teaches us about sin, it teaches us about forgiveness, and how we all need it. This is why we don't get rid of the artwork in the church, the banners and such, because all those pictures bring to mind things Jesus said, His words. Secondly, what kind of message does it send to do this tradition? What does it say about me/us? This one is important, because we do not want to send the wrong message. We do not want to give the wrong impression. Some of the things we do are in danger of doing this, we walk the line with this. Chanting, hymns, the way we do our worship, how calm and restrained we all are when we sing. There are many Christians that think these things make us look like Roman Catholics. It's sending a mixed message.

We keep them because they're still valuable tools, and because we usually have the opportunity to explain how we are different than the Catholics.

Finally, do I think I am not a Christian if I get rid of this? I am a minimalist by nature, one of the true joys of my life is getting rid of things I don't need, whether they be things I own or habits or chores or whatever. I love doing just enough and no more. Could we get rid of this church building? Could we change our worship? We did all those things during the early days of the pandemic, and while it made being Christian harder, it made it lonelier and less joyful, we were still Bethel Lutheran Church, and we still believed and talked about Jesus. We just did it differently. This is an excellent reminder of how little we need to be God's children. Who we are isn't a matter of what we do, it is a matter of what Christ has done and still does for us. He saves us, He loves us, He preaches to us, He feeds us, and that's what makes us who we are. What we do as church should be in service to those things, it should be about those things.

How to wrap this up? Jesus wants the Pharisees to do their job, delivering God's Word into the ears of the people. He wants you to do your job, and be receivers of God's Word, vessels for it, a cup to pour it into. He doesn't want a lot of distractions to that, so He says some very harsh words to remind us of how seriously He takes that task. Hear it, think about it, and try to find a way to make it fit in your life, and wham-bam, you're doing better than the Pharisees ever did. But the Pharisees didn't get that way overnight, we don't rot away overnight either. We're always tempted to go with things that aren't the Bible, to go with things that we just make up. That can lead our hearts astray. We don't need to get rid of those things, we just need to remember that they aren't the point. Jesus is the point. Hearing about Him, eating Him, praying to Him, these things are what matters most. Next to that, the needs of our neighbor. Everything we do should serve those two purposes. May God keep us always on that path, because its a tricky one.

Amen