

The Value of Traditions

By: Penny Holste

February 12, 2012. Our values and traditions can be a good thing, but they can also take on a life of their own and become destructive. Pastor Penny preaches today that it's important that we hear what Jesus is saying about values and tradition, to trust in him and listen to the word of God with open hearts.

*** Transcript ***

We begin this morning in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The story of "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" begins as the sorcerer, or the wizard, is finishing his day in the workshop and going home, and leaving his apprentice to clean up. But his apprentice does not like to clean up. Especially he does not like fetching the water from the well outside and bringing it into this big cistern in the workshop. The apprentice doesn't really know magic, but he's watched the wizard, and so he gets this idea that if he takes a broom, maybe he can cast a spell on it. And he does, and it works: the broom grows arms and legs and feet and hands, and he teaches the broom to fetch water. So the apprentice sits back, gleefully watching this broom doing all his work, going back and forth, bucket after bucket of water. But then he begins to realize something: the water is getting close to the top of the cistern and the broom is still gathering water. And he doesn't know enough magic to make it stop. Well, he just watches as it starts overflowing. And finally in desperation he grabs an axe and he chops the broom in half, only to discover that each half then grows arms and legs and begins to fetch water. Well, catastrophe is averted when the wizard, or the sorcerer, unexpectedly comes back and breaks the spell. But the broom, which was a useful tool and meant for good use, took on a life of its own and became a real danger.

In the gospel today, Jesus is saying that is exactly what can happen with tradition or rules or values. They are a good thing, but they can take on a life of their own and become destructive, even weapons. The laws of the Jews were something that were given to them as a gift. They were chosen to be the people of God and given the Ten Commandments. And they tried hard to obey them, because they wanted to stay connected with God. It was their response to God's love. It was a pleasure for them to strive to obey the Commandments. But of course, the Ten Commandments are pretty broad. And they need to be applied to daily life. So for that they looked to the leaders who came up with other laws, which they call the Oral Laws or the Tradition of the Elders. These were laws that would help them apply the Ten Commandments. But this is where the laws began to have a life of their own. And I think what happened is that the religious leaders began to lose their trust in God. They began to fear that if they didn't keep all of the laws perfectly, that God would turn God's back on them and let their nation be destroyed.

And by the time of Jesus there were six hundred and thirteen of these little laws, which the religious leaders taught the people they must keep perfectly. Now, the religious leaders were of the middle class and upper classes, and they had some leisure and they had some money. But the common people, called the people of the land disdainfully by the leaders, couldn't keep all of these. And so the leaders taught them that by failing to keep these, the Tradition of the Elders, they were failing God. They were unholy, they were unclean, and most heartbreakingly that there was no place for them in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus said to the Pharisees, you have rules that are human rules and you've elevated them above God's rules, and they go in opposition to the very heart of what God wants. Now these things happened over years, and they happen subtly, these changes in how they thought about the law. But I don't think we have to look very far back in the history of the Christian church to see how easily that happens. It wasn't even 200 years ago when many Christians believed that slavery was accepted by God. Paul had written that slaves should be diligent workers for their masters. And Jesus had never said anything about slavery being bad, so they assumed that slavery was acceptable. And for years the church taught that, until finally they woke up to see what a horrible and wicked thing slavery was, and how it was tearing apart our black brothers and sisters.

Well, there's another issue that people take sides on in the church today. And that is whether women should be pastors -- women's ordination. And I really understand why the tradition that only men should be pastors is so deeply felt by people, because I felt it very deeply. I grew up without seeing any women ministers, and I felt it was wrong for women to aspire to become a pastor. It took years before I felt differently. And only after I talked to people who had thought through the process, and prayed and studied and had come to the decision that it was destructive, and was a poor tradition that was destroying the church to bar half of the population from using their gifts to the glory of God. But it was a deep-seated feeling, and it still is in the hearts of many people.

Another issue over which I have changed my feelings is when I grew up I was taught that if you weren't a heterosexual, you were wrong and your lifestyle is wrong. I don't think I was taught that so much as society taught it to me. It was just a deeply ingrained tradition and value. My parents, however, taught me that you always are kind to people, even if you don't agree with them. And so when I was at a workshop once, I went to a breakout session where a woman and her partner did the presentation. This woman talked about her love for Christ, and how active she had been in church and how much she loved it. And then she talked about how when she was a little girl, she knew there was something different about her. But she never really understood it. And then when she was an adult and understood the difference, she found that her church no longer wanted her. And that made me start thinking. And I started reading and praying, and reading the scripture, and talking to people. And I slowly changed that value, that tradition that had been so deeply inside of me, to believe that however we are born -- whatever gender, or however we understand ourselves -- that we are in the image of God and that God wants everyone's life to be full of relationships and the ability to share their gifts with the church.

Now, I know not everyone agrees with me on this. Not everyone in our country or our church body, or I'm sure the congregation. But that's why it's so important that we hear what Jesus is saying today about values and tradition. He is saying we are not united because we all agree on how to live out the Christian life; we are united by Christ. We are united by our love of Christ, which bridges the differences that we have. We are called here by the Holy Spirit to be one Christian community, to love and respect one another in spite of differences. If ever we tried to find a way to avoid using our traditions and values as weapons against each other, it would be to look at the model of Jesus. He did not agree with the lifestyle of prostitutes and tax collectors, and yet he was willing to eat with them and talk with them, and he cared about them.

In this highly politicized world, I thought it was interesting to hear a story about two men who considered themselves to be enemies. One, whose name is Gene Gregory, is the president of the United Egg Producers of America. The other is Wayne Pacelle, and he is the president of the Humane Society of America. And they were at opposite ends on the issue of how you handle animals in the process of producing eggs. Pacelle really took on the egg producers, and said you have these chickens in these

little tiny cages, and you cram the cages into these little tiny rooms, and it's wrong. Well, between them they were spending millions of their organizations' dollars fighting each other. And last summer they used kind of a go-between to ask each other: could we sit down and talk? And they did. And what they decided was they could spend the next 10 or 15 years throwing millions of dollars of their organizations' money back and forth and get nowhere. And better would be to see if they could devise a compromise they could both live with. And that's exactly what they did, and there will be a bill before Congress, if it passes, that is a compromise for both of them. And most interestingly what the article said is they discovered at the end of their conversations together they had respect for each other. Gregory said of Pacelle: he is a man of his word. He didn't really want to destroy the whole egg producing industry. He just wanted things to be right. And Pacelle said of Gregory: I learned so much from our talks. I learned all the pressures that farmers are under and why we have to move slowly so that we don't destroy their livelihood. Two men who had different values decided to stop using their values as weapons.

It is so very hard as Christians to know how to live out our faith. Culture does not teach us well. There are pitfalls all over. We can't go by the culture. We have to struggle with these things. But one thing, and one thing alone, is what Jesus asks us to do. And that is not to trust our traditions and our values and our laws above God, but to trust in Christ, to listen to the word of God with open hearts, to pray with an open heart, and to believe that the Holy Spirit has been given to us. And that as we trust in Christ there will be changes along the way. We may change our mind about things. We may ask for forgiveness, or we may not. We may find that what we believed was the right thing. But as we rely on Christ, we can be sure that the Spirit walks with us through all those questions and quandaries in life, and will never leave our side, and finally will bring us safely home into the arms of a loving God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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