

What traditions do you have in your family? What do you do on a regular basis that provides stability to you and your family? I know that some of you are parts of large Southern families that have a tradition that you get together for a family reunion at least once a year. One of the privileges of my job here is that I get to crash some of these family reunions. There is always plenty of food and plenty of conversation. And we all know in the south that mayonnaise never goes bad when it is sitting out at family reunions even when the temperature gets 100 degrees.

I know some of you have traditions that are connected to seasons of the year. You may be a hunter or you may fish. If you are a hunter you may have a tradition that when deer or turkey season begins you have a trip planned somewhere to hunt.

Some of our families may have traditions connected with certain foods that we prepare. When the family gets together for Christmas or Thanksgiving you are always the one that provides the dessert or you are the one that always hosts the rest of the family.

Some of you may have traditions concerning travel. When summer comes you always plan a trip to the beach or when winter comes you always plan a trip to the mountains. Or maybe vice-versa. Some of you may have traditions connected to your birthdays or anniversaries. Some of you may have traditions connected to the food you eat in the morning. Traditions are important because traditions provide us some stability. If we have no traditions then we may feel like we have no base.

And how many of you have been in arguments when someone wanted to change a certain tradition that you hold dear? Maybe it is a tradition in your family. Maybe it is a tradition at work. Maybe it is a tradition at church. How many church fights have originated from someone wanting to start a new tradition or change an already established tradition?

We have read a passage of Scripture where Jesus challenges the traditions of the Pharisees and Scribes. And as I read this passage, I wondered how many preachers and church leaders have used this text as a proof text to chastise a congregation for being too hardened in their ways and tradition bound. How many preachers have gotten into trouble telling congregations that they needed to change their traditions and follow the new preacher in creating a new tradition?

In the passage we have read today, the practice of ritual cleansing comes into focus. It seems that it was tradition for people taking part in religious services to go through a ritual of cleansing. But the followers of Jesus do not see this ritual cleansing as anything important. And I'm kinda glad that my children are not here in worship today. I'm not sure I want them to read that the followers of Jesus' didn't wash their hands.

But as McCormick Seminary president Cynthia Campbell points out, "it is worth noting that Jesus does not condemn the practice of ritual cleansing, neither does he condemn observances of the Sabbath. Both are good appropriate traditions which are a part of a healthy life and spirituality. The problem arises when religious practices and doctrines that are intended to bring life and health to the spirit and community become barriers to reaching out to others with the love, justice, and mercy of God." Or when human traditions are substituted for the commandments of God.

Jesus uses the example of the commandment to honor father and mother. The religious leaders are saying that they don't have to do this because they are setting aside their money for religious purposes. But Jesus calls them hypocrites because they are using their involvement in the church as an excuse to not take care of their parents. And Jesus says God's commandments are more important than their religious practices. Religious traditions which are keeping them from following God's will.

Traditions are not problems. We need traditions. The problem arises when our traditions are used to keep people out. You see, we want to use traditions to keep people out. There is something self-satisfying when we are on the inside and someone else in on the outside. We like being the ones who can look out upon others and say we are on the inside and we are greater than them.

But using traditions to exclude is not the way Jesus advises us to use our traditions. If our traditions exclude, then it is better to change our traditions. If our traditions include then traditions can be celebrated.

If we take Jesus seriously, then that means that we look at all of our traditions and ask ourselves are these traditions including or are they excluding? For instance, anyone who has worshipped here for several years knows that I made a change in my wardrobe on Sunday morning. I was taught to wear a robe while in the pulpit. I used to always wear a robe. Robes became traditions for pastors to wear because they took away focus on what the pastor was wearing. But I came to the conclusion that over time this good tradition was beginning to separate this pastor from the congregation. And so I stopped wearing robes except for special occasions like weddings, funerals, and services like Easter. Robes are fine for others but it is a tradition that became a stumbling block for me in connecting to newcomers to the church.

What are some other traditions that we need to examine? Is the way we gather to worship inclusive or exclusive? Do we use terminology that is inviting or exclusive? Is it a good tradition to gather for worship here in this building or do we need to venture out to other places in the community to conduct religious services? Is this the best place for religious education or should we be out teaching in places outside these walls where people live and play? These are the types of questions that I think Jesus would want us to ask. Traditions are only helpful when they provide stability but they also are inclusive.

I want to conclude with a story about a church tradition that took on a new and powerful meaning. The setting is a black African church, the occasion a foot washing ceremony. It was tradition for this church to conduct a foot washing during Maundy Thursday. One by one, the pastor, Rev. Buti, had called the people to come forward to take part in the ceremony, either washing another's feet or having their own feet washed. They he called the name of Martha Fortuin.

So Martha Fortuin, who thirty years earlier had gone to work as a domestic servant in the home of the newly married Jan Christian Oliver left her seat to come forward. She walked with head downcast as becomes a modest and devout woman. Then she heard the name called out of Jan Christian Olivier. She heard the gasp in the congregation as the judge came forward. Then Pastor Buti gave the towel to the judge.

The judge then took the dish of water and knelt at the feet of his domestic servant Martha Fortuin. He took her right foot in his hands and washed it and dried it with the towel. They her took her other foot in his hands and washed it and dried it with the towel. Then he took both of his maid's feet and kissed them.

When traditions show the love, grace, mercy, and justice of God to those on the outside, then traditions are a good thing. AMEN.

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-Campbell, Cynthia, Christian Century, August 22, 2006, p.16, [www.religion-online.org](http://www.religion-online.org)

-Paton, Alan, "Ah, but Your Land is Beautiful, as quoted in Juengst, Sara Covin, "Breaking Bread: The Spiritual Significance of Food," WJKP, Louisville, 1992

-Text: Mark 1-23

-Given: August 30, 2009 in Allison Creek Presbyterian Church (York, SC)