

Breaking with Tradition

Sermon 112 | Greystone Baptist Church | August 29, 2021

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

One day after school a young girl noticed that her mom was cutting off the ends of a pot roast before putting it in the oven to cook for dinner. She had seen her mom do this many times before but had never asked her why. So this time she asked and her mom replied, "I don't know why I cut the ends off, but it's what my mom always did. Why don't you ask your Grandma?"

Perhaps the mother responded this way because she was busy and she really didn't have time to think about it. Maybe she was tired from a full day's work. Maybe she just didn't have the energy to consider one more reason *why*. Nevertheless, the young girl picked up the phone and called her grandmother to ask the question: "Grandmother, why do you cut the ends off a pot roast before putting it in the oven to cook?"

"Well I don't know dear, it's just the way we've always done it. My mother taught me to do it that way, I do it that way, I taught your mother to do it that way... I suppose she will teach you the same." Her grandmother replied.

The young girl remembered her great-grandmother, who was well up in age, and dialed her number, hoping that she might be able to answer the question. "Great-grandmother," the young girl said when her elderly relative answered the phone. "Do you know why all the women in the family cut the ends off of the pot roast before putting it in the oven to cook?"

“Oh! Why yes, my darling, I do know,” the young girl could almost hear the smile on her face through the phone. “When your great-grandfather and I were young and first married, he used to love pot roast... Our oven was so small, the roast just wouldn’t fit in a dish that would fit in the oven. So I learned that if I cut the ends off, it would fit just fine.”

We all have stories like this don’t we? I love this story because *it is so us*, isn’t it?

I just finished canning 200 lbs. of tomatoes I bought from a farm down the road. It’s something I do every year because my family will enjoy the salsa, pasta sauce, and stewed tomatoes all year long. But I also do it because it makes me feel connected to my mom, and her mom, and her mom. Even the method we use for the stewed tomatoes isn’t the same as any recipe I find in the “Ball Book” and if someone were to ask me *why* we do it the way we do, I wouldn’t know how to answer. I’d just say: “because my mom, and her mom, and her mom all did it this way.”

Traditions connect us to our past in powerful ways. They remind us of loved ones who are no longer with us; they give us a way to keep their memories alive long after they are gone, and they help us feel rooted in a story larger than ourselves. For exactly these reasons, families and faith communities tend to be really good at creating and preserving traditions. In our families of origin and our families of faith, we participate in a story that is bigger than ourselves, the story of God’s creation that is being written anew each and every day.

Because that story - God's story - is created in community, it stretches forward and backwards in time, connecting us to our ancestors as well as those who will be born long after we are gone. It is a timeless exercise, one that gives us a place in the past, the present, and the future of God's story. And, because that story - God's story - is created in community, it is rooted in relationships that are dynamic and constantly changing as we grow and learn together.

As Baptists, we have a few traditions that we hold dear, rituals that connect us to the fathers and mothers of our faith and represent – for us – the work of God in our lives, individually and collectively.

Perhaps the most distinctive tradition for Baptists is believer's baptism – by immersion! While most Baptists understand this tradition to be largely symbolic of the work of the Holy Spirit within the individual, we still do it because it means something. The experience of baptism, for many of us, is deeply spiritual as we have felt the presence of God draw near to us in the water. And, many of us, even at this young church, can remember times when we have had to adapt our theologies and practices of baptism for the sake of love and welcome.

Another tradition we hold dear is that of communion. Once a month we set the table with bread and drink, remembering the last supper of Jesus with his disciples, which of course was part of Jesus' Jewish tradition of remembering Passover. A tradition within a tradition. We have changed the elements, the dishes, and the context around the table many, many times. Just think about the

various ways we have adapted this practice in recent months... Still, we come to the table and receive the elements; and in God's mystery, we can still feel the presence of the Holy Spirit at that table. It is a transcendent experience. One that connects us to God and to our past, present, and future.

These are two of our biggest and most important traditions as Baptists, but there are so many others, if we take an honest look in the mirror. There are songs we sing, words we say, practices we hold dear, and unwritten rules we all know by heart.

...Traditions that connect us to our past, that remind us about who we are, and that give us a sense of security and hope that our legacy will live on, beyond us.

Past, present, and future.

It is, perhaps, these important connections to past, present, and future, that cause us to feel a little defensive when newcomers or outsiders ask the question: *why?* To be fair, we have wrestled with this question a LOT in recent history... We have had to ask...

Why do we gather in person for worship, prayer, study, and sharing meals?

Why do we always want to be in person for meetings and conversations that probably could take place over email or on the phone?

Why is it so important to visit those who cannot physically make it to church?

Why?

Whereas before we might have responded like the mother in the kitchen... "I don't know, we just always have!" Now we can say with confidence," the Spirit of God dwells among us, fills the space between us... and we feel closer to God when and because we are closer to one another.

BUT

We have also learned that the ways we have always done church, worship in the sanctuary, familiar hymns led by our choir, Sunday school in the room down the hall, and the meaningful conversations that take place between here and there, these are important, significant, holy, and soul-filling.

But when it is not safe, or when life's circumstances take us away from this physical in-person space, we can still worship God together, we can still love one another... just in new and different ways. Sometimes, it is easy to deviate from tradition, when we have a good reason why. But without the why we begin to wonder if we need to keep or reform our traditions. We begin to wonder if we still want to cut the ends off the pot roast... so to speak.

It is hard enough to change our traditions when we experience the need for change together. Like the pandemic, for example. We started 2020 gearing up for an exciting year of church ministry. But then, we all recognized it had to come to a halt. And so we stopped everything we used to do and we re-imagined our church for the pandemic.

BUT sometimes change isn't so kind to us. Sometimes we don't all see the need for transformation and re-imagination at the same time... or even at all! Sometimes, we can be quite comfortable with the way things are, with traditions intact just the way we received them.

That is how the Scribes and Pharisees felt when they noticed Jesus' disciples were not observing the traditions of their elders. They were eating with defiled hands, the Gospel says, before offering a list of ritual purity violations the disciples were guilty of making. So they ask Jesus: Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders?

And if we keep reading along, we notice that Jesus' response is not one that seems characteristic of the cool, calm, and collected mystic who sits passively on the hillside, holding baby lambs while communing with children. No, this text shows Jesus animated with prophetic fire, and filled with righteous indignation and passion that will not allow any reader – ancient or modern – to misinterpret what he is saying.

Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites...

'This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.'

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.

Yeesh, those are strong words Jesus! Words that cause us to pause and question which side of tradition we will be on when Jesus comes back quoting Isaiah in our time?

Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites... You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition. That is a daunting critique. One that has an uncomfortable closeness to the critique of so many in our world who identify as spiritual but not religious, as nones or dones... folks who have said "No" to institutional religious communities or folks who have walked away from them, fed up with what they have experienced on the inside. They're done with church... and many say they are never coming back.

It also sounds like the voices of so many people of color I heard during the 2016 uprising in Charlotte. Voices of many who were frustrated with the clergy who had never considered the lasting impacts of systemic racism and white supremacy, clergy who now wanted to help keep peace in the city saying: You hypocrites! (they said) You're too late. If you had been doing your job at all, we wouldn't have to be out here right now.

And it sounds like the voices of our financially poor neighbors who call this church asking for money saying: Isn't this what the church of Jesus is supposed to do? Feed the hungry? Heal the sick? Lift up the downtrodden?

And it also sounds like the astonishing number of LGBTQ youth who run away from their Christian homes, who are plunged into mental health crises, and who even resort to taking their own lives, all because somebody who said they loved them, stood within the unshakable tradition of the ancient church and told them they were defiled in one way or another.

You hypocrites! they say, you abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.

This may be a good time to remind ourselves that just a few chapters later, in this same Gospel, Jesus says: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (12:29-31).

Have we abandoned this commandment in favor of our traditions?

You know it is so interesting to me that Jesus’ critique here, of the Scribes and Pharisees isn’t that their traditions are bad. He doesn’t say, “Hey you shouldn’t be washing your hands in ritual practice, you don’t have to clean yourself or worry about where that food came from, or whether the farmer could have sown the seed in violation of Sabbath... that stuff doesn’t matter.”

No. Jesus doesn’t condemn the traditions of the elders and their value within the community. Jesus condemns that those traditions were being observed at the expense and exclusion of other people.

That, he says in essence, is the antithesis of love.

So many of our traditions are rooted in love. Our love of God and desire to live our lives as faithful disciples of Jesus are the reasons we hold our traditions in such high esteem. The memories of God's closeness to us in these moments is something we want to share with others and preserve for our children and grandchildren. All of that is born out of love.

But there are times when our children and grandchildren come to us asking the question, why? And in so doing, they challenge us to remember the truth behind the tradition. In these precious and holy moments we have an opportunity to listen, to examine, and to reform our traditions in some new and incredible ways.

I love that little story about the pot roast so much. Every time I hear it though, I can't help but think about all the good meat that got cut off and tossed aside because the original container... three generations ago, was too small. Makes me wonder if our love is cut off unnecessarily because it is trying to fit into an old container that is just too small?

Maybe we need to become like the child and begin asking the questions that will lead us to examine our own hearts - from the inside out - to see what matters most... the maintenance of our traditions... or the greatest commandment of God...

Love.