

**PENTECOST 13B/LECTIONARY 22**

August 30, 2009

*Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ*

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Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9   Psalm 15   James 1:17-27   Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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Do we have any Cleveland Browns fans in the congregation?

Until 1996 the Cleveland Browns football team had some of the most loyal fans in all of sports. For them, Sunday was the main event of the week. Early on Sunday morning, they came to Cleveland Stadium to enjoy tailgate parties and talk about their beloved Browns. And then in the afternoon, they filed to the stadium to cheer and holler.

But all that changed in 1996. Owner Art Modell moved the team to Baltimore and changed its name to the Ravens, crushing the hearts of Cleveland fans.

Surprisingly, that didn't stop these fans from doing what they had done for years. On opening day, September 1, 1996, some fans showed up at Cleveland Stadium just as they had done for the last forty-six years and held tailgate parties. They wore Browns jerseys, waved Browns flags, and chanted, "Let's go, Brownies." Then shortly before one o'clock they refilled their cups and marched to the stadium gates. But the stadium was quiet and empty.

You see, these fans still clung unto their tradition, even though the reason for their tradition had ceased to be. Their ritual of going to the stadium on Sunday and tail-gate parties had become an empty tradition, an end in itself, a habit without meaning.<sup>1</sup>

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In today's Gospel lesson, some Pharisees confront Jesus about his disciples' failure to follow tradition – they do not ritually wash their hands before eating. It is as if the Pharisees are saying, “If you were really a good rabbi – a good leader and teacher – you would instruct your disciples in the proper ways and ensure that they follow them.”

But rather than directly address the indictment of the Pharisees – that his disciples didn't wash their hands before dinner – Jesus goes on the offensive. He points out to them that such traditions have become empty habits, devoid of meaning.

Today's text from Deuteronomy points out that the Israelites received the law so that, by diligent observance, the peoples of other nations would see the Israelites' wisdom and discernment. But in order to ensure that they adequately kept the law, the Israelites created a vast array of traditions. Eventually, keeping man-made traditions became of utmost importance.

Jesus reminds the Pharisees in his counter-accusation that the law was not intended to be an end in itself – the law was intended to be a *means* to an end. The law was intended to point to God, to help others see and come to know the God of Israel. Tradition, in and of itself, does not necessarily point to God. Jesus bluntly accuses the Pharisees: “You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

This, then, begs the question: What is *the commandment* to which Jesus is referring, which the people had replaced with tradition-keeping?

Jesus is pointing the Pharisees straight back to the law. Jesus makes this explicit later in the Gospel of Mark when a scribe asks him, “What is the greatest commandment?” Jesus responds: “‘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 you 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.” These words are straight out of the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup>

Any good tradition would be a sign pointing back toward God. Any tradition should serve as a reminder of this covenant relationship with God which calls us to love of God and neighbor. Jesus is telling the Pharisees that this is the commandment they should be keeping, rather than mindlessly following tradition.

I'm reminded of the story about the woman who is preparing a Thanksgiving dinner. Before she puts the turkey in the pan, she carefully cuts off the legs. Her daughter asks her why she does that, and the mother responds that's the way her mother always did it. So the daughter phones the grandmother and asks her why she always cut the legs off the turkey before putting it in the pan. The grandmother says, "Because my pan was too small!"

I wonder if our current traditions serve as they were intended – do they point back toward God? I propose that you spend some period of time in your church life to question everything. When you find yourself doing something "because that's the way we've always done it," ask yourself why it's always been done that way. And further ask yourself, does the way we've always done things still have meaning? Or are we like those Cleveland Browns fans who continue doing the same old thing, simply for traditions' sake?

Does doing something a particular way point to your entire love of God, and your love of your neighbor as yourself? Do our traditions continue to shine as beacons leading others to Christ?

Change. That's a scary proposition. Reminds me of that old joke... How many Lutherans does it take to change a light bulb? None, Lutherans don't believe in change.

I wonder how we Lutherans got that reputation? After all, we're the original instigators of change, so far as the church is concerned. Martin Luther wasn't afraid to re-examine the way the church of his time was doing things. He wasn't ashamed to say, "Look, we're only doing these things because we fell into doing it this way over so many years. But these traditions don't serve their intended purpose anymore – they don't point people back toward the love and grace of God. These man-made traditions have become nothing more than a law. We all know that law cannot save; only by the grace of God are we saved."

Change can be a good thing. For instance, a newspaper gardening columnist highlights how change may be good for us "plants." She says, "Giving new bedding plants some rough treatment at planting time may be the best thing you can do to help them survive in the garden. When I was new to gardening, I tried to set tomatoes, petunias, and other bedding plants in the garden without disturbing their roots at all. Nowadays, I'm much more ruthless... If the plant has been growing in its pot so long that the roots are circling the bottom, I jab my finger into the bottom of the soil and pull down to untangle the roots... If the whole pot is filled with circling roots, I have to be merciless."<sup>3</sup>

I think that sometimes we Christians resemble these root-bound plants. We grow comfortable where we are, and with the man-made traditions we've formed. Our roots circle around and around in the same small area, no longer reaching out for life and nourishment and growth. Our roots no longer stretch out into the soil. Our roots curve back in upon ourselves. Perhaps the healthiest thing we can do, for our own long-term well-being, is shake up our "roots."

I understand that change is rarely easy. We spend much of our time and energy trying to create stability, whether it be in our home lives or in our jobs. But the question we need to ask ourselves, especially as it relates to the church, is: Is change necessary in order for me to better communicate my love of God and neighbor? Is the same old way of doing things communicating what it did before? Or do we need to find a new way of doing things, in order to stretch beyond ourselves and to better point to God?

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A man told a story about sitting at home, reading the paper one evening. But his little daughter kept bothering him. Finally, he tore a sheet out of his magazine, on which was printed the map of the world. Tearing it into small pieces, he gave it to his daughter and said, "Go into the other room and see if you can put this together."

After a few minutes, the girl returned and handed him the map correctly fitted together. The father was surprised and asked how she had finished so quickly.

“Oh,” she said, “on the other side of the paper was a picture of Jesus. When I got Jesus in the middle, then the world came out all right.”

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Perhaps this is the litmus test we should apply whenever we stop to examine our traditions or contemplate proposed change: Is Jesus Christ in the center of all we do? Are our actions pointing to God? Is what we are doing helping our neighbors to better know God?

This is good tradition: tradition that points to God in Christ Jesus in the center of our lives. From this stable center, we are freed to stretch out our roots and try new ways of loving God with all our heart, soul and strength. We are freed to stretch out our roots to a deepened relationship with God. We are freed to stretch out our roots in new ways, in the hope of leading our neighbors to the grace of God which we enjoy. We are freed, through Jesus Christ, to be bearers of God’s love to the world.

Amen.

[1,662 words]

<sup>1</sup> “Two-Minute Drill,” *Chicago Tribune*, 2 September 1996, sec. 3, p. 4 in Craig Brian Larson, *750 Engaging Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, & Writers* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2002), p. 771.

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4 and Leviticus 19:18

<sup>3</sup> Jan Riegenbach, “Midwest Gardening” *Daily Herald*, 8 May 1994 in Craig Brian Larson, *750 Engaging Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, & Writers* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2002), p. 61.