

August 22, 2021 Pentecost 13B

Mark 7:1-13

The Pros and Cons of Tradition

Anthony DeMello was a Jesuit priest and author who tells a story about an ashram cat. He writes,

*"When the guru sat down to worship each evening, the ashram cat would get in the way and distract the worshipers. So he ordered that the cat be tied during evening worship. After the guru died the cat continued to be tied during evening worship. And when the cat died, another cat was brought to the ashram so that it could be duly tied during evening worship. Centuries later learned treatises were written by the guru's disciples on the religious and liturgical significance of tying up a cat while worship is performed."*

Most Christians, and certainly Lutherans, have their own ashram cats. We have a lot of traditions. Some of them are really helpful. I have missed seeing people come to the altar for communion during these COVID restrictions. That is a helpful tradition. And there are others. But these traditions sometimes becomes ashram cats that are not only distracting, but they can keep people from their deeper purpose – not only in worship but also in life.

In the seventh chapter of Mark's Gospel, Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah, describing the way God looks into the human heart.

*"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules."*

And then, *"You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions."*

Traditions are not bad. They can serve a bad purpose or a good one. Jesus is going after traditions that serve a bad purpose. God sees the many ways people become distracted by appearances and human traditions that fall short of connecting them to what really matters. In this particular case, the religious leaders were criticizing Jesus and his followers for failing to follow a tradition of ritually washing their hands before eating. They were eating with what was termed, "defiled hands." This rule was related to the

kosher laws, but Jesus challenged them and quoted Isaiah, saying, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me... You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." In other words, their focus was all wrong. In focusing on human traditions and looking only at the outward appearance of things, they had failed to actually honor God, because it is what is in the human heart that matters to God. Like the ashram cat, somewhere along the way, the entire meaning and purpose of what they were doing had been lost. And like the people in both of these stories demonstrate, it is easy to mistake the appearance of things for the meaning itself. At that point, distraction reigns and the focus on what matters is lost. And it is certainly easy to get distracted these days.

Those who have been around a while remember in 1981 a new hymnal came out. It caused quite a lot of conflict in the church. Some churches actually split over which hymnal to use. We had the same argument in 1940 when the Lutheran hymnal was translated from German to English. People left churches because they had always worshipped in German and even though they spoke English well, German worship was their tradition. The tradition became a distraction.

Indeed, ashram cats surround us, and distractions abound in America today. One of those distractions is the over-focus on one's outward appearance. Americans, it turns out, on average, spend nearly a quarter of a million dollars on grooming and beauty products in their lifetimes – that equates to hundreds of dollars per month. And what about time usage? There's a fascinating study called the "American Time Use Survey" that was conducted in 2014. It studied the time habits of Americans in a wide variety of activities. Researchers learned that Americans spend an average of 45 to 55 minutes (roughly an hour) on grooming every day. They also spend an average of 4 to 6 hours per day on leisure activities. And how much time does the average American spend on spiritual or religiously related activities like prayer? An average of 2 to 15 minutes per day. That's quite a contrast and appears to underscore Jesus' point.

Distractions abound. A new skincare line describes in its literature various skincare "concerns" that ranged from wrinkles to skin tone to blemishes to discoloration to firmness and even included a method to "map" the size of one's pores. Imagine it: we're now mapping the size of people's pores? Americans spend an incredible amount of money on plastic

surgeries and products that promise to make them better or younger, even though it's a losing battle: everyone must age and will eventually die. While there is nothing inherently wrong with trying to look one's best, the ultimate purpose in life, including the legacy one leaves, has nothing to do with such things. Of course, most people know this deep down, but may be too distracted to make substantial changes to their daily lives.

Indeed, people are bombarded with images every day of what they should be, do, and look like according to the outside world. Western culture and human tradition prescribe "rules" that include being thin, attractive, strong, wealthy, owning nice cars, having big homes, owning the right tech gadgets, smelling good, wearing the right clothes (with colors to match one's skin tone), having straight and white teeth, having plenty of shiny thick hair, and flawless skin (presumably with extremely tiny pores). In addition, people seem to be required to marry a good-looking spouse or have a good-looking partner, have 2.5 kids, and not have any real deficits physically, financially, or mentally. One should appear youthful no matter their age. And so, when people fall short of these rules, because absolutely everyone will, one may feel less-than and believe their value and purpose in life has somehow been diminished.

But this is not the way of Jesus or the Scriptures. These are not the rules or traditions of God or the standards for one's life according to God's Word. These are truly vain human traditions and actually much worse than any ashram cat.

Jesus and the Pharisees are at odds because their core values are so different. For Jesus, life with God, the life He wanted to bring people into, was a life of loving God and loving each other. For the Pharisees, life with God was about self-righteousness and self-promotion—using religious laws to prove they were better than others.

Jesus invites his followers to let go of human rules and obsessions so they can focus on having a heart that is pure and filled with love for God and others. Jesus' invitation leads to a life that is more than just going through the motions – a life centered on the precepts of God.

So, what if people spent more time on what really mattered, on cultivating their hearts and lives to be in accord with God's will for them and the world and less time worrying about what others thought about them or

how they appeared, thereby freeing up their time, focus, and energy for what really mattered? For the things of God?

One unnoticed problem with an over-focus on outward appearances is that it can lead to a failure to notice the more important aspects of one's character – the truly beautiful things about oneself that God has blessed them with, including their inner gifts and qualities that shine the light of Christ. Could it be that in the desperate focus to be perceived as attractive, successful, or appearing to have it "all together" that one no longer notices or simply forgets to utilize their deeper spiritual gifts? And, in turn, could it be that they may not notice the true beauty and spiritual gifts in others either? That is a deep and meaningful loss.

There is a Chinese saying: "You can't measure the sea with a pot." It's similar to "Don't judge a book by its cover." Judging by the "cover" always fails. God is interested in the heart, not words or mere appearances. In the Jewish tradition, the heart is viewed as the seat of the will, not just the place of emotions. In order to align one's will and heart with God's will and purpose, one begins by simply asking God for this grace. "Not my will be done, but Thine."

This decision requires letting go of any ashram cats and no longer doing things for empty, outward appearances, but embracing the truth that when one's heart shines with love for God and others, then one is truly beautiful and successful. One's life can have ultimate meaning and purpose when one chooses to let go of "human traditions" that have dictated and distracted their lives so far. And once one's heart is focused on God's will and purpose, life becomes worth living and purposeful, no matter the circumstances.

So this week, how are you going to draw close to God? Or even better, how are you going to recognize God drawing close to you? He has given you great ways to do that. You are doing one of them right now. Every day this week, take time to let God connect with you.