

**Pentecost XIII (Proper 17 B) RCL**  
**August 30, 2009**

**St. Margaret's**  
**Annapolis**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

The story goes that a man approached a New York cab driver and said, "Take me to London." The cab driver told him there was no possible way for him to drive his cab across the Atlantic. The customer insisted there was. "You'll drive me down to the pier and we'll put the taxi on a freighter and when we get off at Liverpool, you'll drive me to London and I'll pay you whatever is on the meter." The cabbie agreed, and when they arrived in London, good to his word the passenger payed the total on the meter plus a \$1000 tip.

The cabbie was then roaming around London and didn't know what to do. A Londoner hailed him and said, "I want you to drive me to New York." The cab driver couldn't believe his luck! How often can you pick up a faire in London who wants to go to New York! The passenger said, "First, we take a boat..." But the driver interrupted and said, "That I know. Where do you want to go in New York?" The passenger says, "Riverside and 104th." "Sorry," said the cabbie, "I don't go to the Westside."

Now *that's* character, isn't it! I mean, we have to have standards, after all. Standards, rules, tradition. We've got to uphold them, protect them, stick to them no matter what, or who knows where it will all end!

Remember Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof"? How every time his daughters challenge the way things are, he sings... "Tradition!"

Ah, tradition. What could be more dear to the hearts of good Episcopalians than tradition! We practically coined the phrase: "We've always done it that way."

And let me be the first to commend and celebrate tradition. At its best, tradition is the handing down from one generation to the next **the beliefs and customs and ways of doing things that have proven valuable.**

We have family traditions. We put the Christmas tree in a particular place and at just the right time. The menu at Thanksgiving always includes

grandmother's cranberry relish and Aunt Sis's sweet potatoes. The 4th of July means fireworks.

And there are community traditions. In Annapolis, those include many of the activities around the Naval Academy: Commencement Week, the Blue Angels, and Navy football. Here at St. Margaret's, our traditions include things like the Blue Grass Mass, the Joust, the Christmas Eve pageant, lemonade on the sidewalk in the summer. And every now and then a new tradition works its way into our pattern, like the Blessing of the Animals many churches do now in conjunction with St. Francis' Day.

Traditions are good things – very good things – when they are in service to a good cause; when they stand for something life- giving; when they are **a means to an end**, a transcendent end.

Traditions work for the good when they remind us of what they stand for. It's not the sweet potatoes... so much as it is how much we love Aunt Sis who brings them. It's not the lemonade so much as it the gathering for a bit of fellowship after church.

But traditions can turn into **traditionalism**. That's when the symbol becomes more important than what it stands for, whether those symbols be cherished objects or sacred stories. If the stained glass, beautiful as it is, becomes more important than the images they represent, or the lives to which they are dedicated, then they have become idols. If even the words of scripture become more important than the One who inspired them... or the people of God for whom they have been written and preserved, then those very scriptures become a golden calf. And this kind of traditionalism takes on a life of its own.

During the Reformation back in the 16th century, there was a church with a beautiful mosaic of the Blessed Virgin. When the people entered the church, they genuflected to the Virgin. But for all the good that the Reformation brought, one of its tragedies was the destruction of thousands of the treasures of Roman Catholic churches.

This particular church covered over its mosaic of the Virgin with a plaster wall. But the tradition of genuflecting lived on. No matter how the Protestant pastors railed against it, the people -- even generations after the memory of the mosaic had faded away -- continued to genuflect as they passed the wall into the church. Soon, no one knew why they genuflected, but the tradition continued to be handed on from generation to generation.

Then, during World War II, that city was bombed, and although the church wasn't hit directly, the plaster wall fell away to reveal its long hidden image of the Virgin. Then at least, the people knew why they had been genuflecting for four centuries!

Would that we could hold traditions reverently... but more lightly.

I believe this is what Jesus was saying to the Pharisees. But to understand anything at all about this teaching of Jesus, we have to remember that the Pharisees are the leaders of the community. They are the members of the vestry, the Baptist deacons and the Presbyterian elders; they are the observant Jews and the devout evangelicals. They are the keepers of the traditions. They mean well.

They see Jesus and his band of disciples as a threat to everything they hold dear. Here's an itinerant preacher, a couple of fishermen, a former Roman collaborator, and no doubt, one or two zealots. And right there in public, for everyone to see, they flaunt the traditions. Everybody knows you're supposed to perform the ritual handwashing before eating. It's not a matter of being dirty, you understand, but of eating with "defiled" hands.

And Jesus says to them something like...

Look, you make handwashing more important than having a pure heart; customs more important than compassion; appearances more important than people.

What is really awkward about this story, which we can easily miss because we distance ourselves from the Pharisees -- is that Jesus is saying these things to US! **WE** are the deacons and the elders and the leaders of the community. We are the clean living, upright, good citizens. We are the keepers of the traditions.

Is it true of us... that traditions are more important than people? That doing things right is more important than doing the right thing? That looking good is more important than being good? It's so much easier to associate such characteristics with the Pharisees -- those rigid, uptight, hypocrites.

And after all, we're just trying to protect what seems good and beautiful and important. We're trying to uphold the rules, because without them, we're lost, aren't we? We've got to have rules. We need traditions.

In 1928, there was a Massachusetts court case about a man who fell into a lake. His friends were too far away to help, but there was a man in a boat

very close to the victim. But the man in the boat just sat and watched; did nothing. And the man in the water drowned. His friends sued, but the court upheld the man's right to do nothing.

Sometimes rules aren't enough.

But how are we to know when we are following rules that are for the common good; when we are holding dear traditions that help us see more clearly the things for which they stand... and when have we slipped over the line and begun to live in the dangerous territory of traditionalism? How do we know? It's a fair question.

Jesus makes it plain... if we will listen to his *whole* teaching; if we will learn from his *whole* life:

- He tells us that actions speak louder than words. Lip service is nothing if our hearts are cold;
- that elevating tradition to doctrine is to miss what the tradition stands for.
- He tells us to remember the essential commandment; that is, to love God and our neighbor, and never put our own rules above this commandment.
- And listen, he says, it's not the stuff *out there* that's the problem; it's the stuff in here -- in our hearts -- that causes all the trouble. And all the rules in the world can't change that.

The only thing that can change our hearts is love. And actually, love **is** our tradition!

Traditionalism is judgmental and fears change. Traditionalism loves the tradition itself more than what it represents. But true tradition, tradition at its best, includes and embraces the new and different when the new and different turns our hearts toward God and toward each other.

So what will it be, Jesus asks us. What will it be?

Amen.

The Reverend Lori M. Lowe