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## Transformative Tradition

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Mark 7:1-13

Psychologist Carl Jung writes of a fascinating experience he had with the Elgoni African tribe while visiting Uganda. He tells of an old man in the village who, after an extended time of idle discussion, suddenly exclaimed, “In the morning, when the sun comes, we go out of the huts, spit into our hands, and hold them up to the sun.” Jung was bewildered, so he asked the man to show him exactly how they did it. Jung recounts the following,

“They held up their hands in front of their mouths spat or blew vigorously, then turned the palms upward toward the sun. I asked what this meant, why they blew or spat into their hands. My questioning was in vain. ‘We’ve always done it,’ they said. It was impossible to obtain any explanation, and I realized that they actually know only that they did it, not what they were doing. They themselves saw no meaning in this action. But we, too, perform ceremonies without realizing what we are doing—such as lighting Christmas tree candles, hiding Easter eggs, etc.”

The old man explained to Jung that this was the true religion of all peoples, that all Kevirondos, all Uganda, all tribes for as far as they could see from the mountain and endlessly farther, worshiped *adhista*—that is, the sun at the moment of rising. Only then, at the rising, was the sun *mungu*, God. Jung conjectured from his experience with the tribe that the spittle was the substance which in the view of the primitives contains the power of healing, magic, and life.

It is interesting to note that in the Bible Jesus heals a blind man by spitting on the man’s eyes and putting his hands on him, and in another passage Jesus “spits on the ground, makes some mud with the saliva, and puts it on the man’s eyes.” There is actually research being done on the properties of

saliva. David Wong, a saliva expert and director of the Dental Research Institute at University of California Los Angeles, says, “It contains immune cells, antimicrobial and antifungal proteins, and growth factors that promote wound healing. There’s a medicinal value in saliva that’s not appreciated.”

Jung offers a beautiful interpretation of this act of offering spittle and breath. “If it were breath, then it was *roho*, Arabic, *ruch*, Hebrew *Ruach*, Greek *Pneuma*, wind and spirit. The act was therefore saying: I offer to God my living soul. It was a wordless, acted-out prayer which might equally well be rendered: ‘Lord, into thy hands I commend my spirit.’”

The tribe did not verbalize the spiritual and psychological dimensions to their ritual because they were already whole-heartedly commending themselves to God and to this larger transcendent reality that was alive with spiritual potency.

What inspires you? What moves you or lifts you? What invokes the sense of God’s presence within you? What do you expect when you come to worship on Sunday morning? Do you expect to encounter the sacred?

Speaking as a worship leader, one of the audacious and elusive challenges of worship is to facilitate sacred experience. That is why we call it worship. All of us set this day aside from all the other days of the week to touch and experience and at the very least be reminded of our relationship to the sacred and profound. This could be just another day of the week, but it isn’t because we have come together as a community of faith to worship God. Through our experience of music, liturgy, tradition, scripture, preaching, and openness to the Holy Spirit, we transcend the mundane as we seek to experience a

connection to the sacred dimension of life. We invoke the Spirit of God and receive what happens.

One's worship experience is both communal yet personal. We gather as a community, and though the scripture and hymns and sermon are the each what they are on any given Sunday, each person will experience it in a different ways. What Kendall is connecting to may be different from Ro experiences. One person may be inspired by an idea and another by a beautiful solo. Sometimes maybe just don't connect at all!

I remember attending a Russian Orthodox service many years ago. I think the service lasted over 2 hours! There were no chairs except a few in the back for the elderly. The environment was beautiful, but I had no context for understanding the liturgy, the incense, the icons, the candles, and priestly vestments. I couldn't appreciate the service. My only thought was, "I wonder how much longer?" With all that beauty and all that tradition, I wasn't able to transcend my own religious context and upbringing. The community, however, was devoted and engrossed in their worship. As I was working on this sermon, I looked up information on the Russian Orthodox Worship practices and found a 71-page practical guide to understanding a Russian Orthodox service. Everything has meaning; it is ordered and probably hasn't changed much over the eons. The design of the building, the divine liturgy, the cross, the candles and icons all have a specific meaning. Aren't you glad we don't have a 71 page guide to our worship?

I don't think it is necessary to understand the history and meaning of every ritual and tradition, but it is important to understand that our religious rituals and traditions carry a meaning and power and depth that has been conferred upon generations and generations. There are so much meaning, history, tradition, and links to ancient rituals and practices, but for most of us, myself included, our rituals and practices can become routine and mechanical.

This morning I intentionally included an invocation in our worship service. An invocation literally means to invoke or call upon a deity, spirit, a god for help, for protection, and for inspiration. For some this may have been uncomfortable, and for others a welcome change. It is an ancient form of prayer that has been used and practiced worldwide in every religion and era. Today an invocation is so commonplace that it has become a standard opening

for various governmental and public events. I used to give one every year for the Little Hearts Luncheon, a fundraiser for the Children's Hospital Heart Institute. David has offered an invocation twice for the Colorado House of Representatives as a prayer for them to begin their day.

Herb Silverman, an atheist, sued for the right to offer an invocation at a city council meeting. In his invocation he said, "Thank you for this opportunity to 'invoke' a minority point of view. . . . We are gathered today, both religious and secular members of our community, with the shared belief that we must treat our fellow human beings with respect and dignity. In this invocation, I don't ask you to close your eyes, but to keep your eyes constantly open to the serious problems that city government can solve or improve. I don't ask you to bow your heads, but to look up at what you can accomplish by applying your considerable talents and experience to the issues that confront us." So here we have yet another invocation that has been redefined in the context of a non-theistic belief system. In this case a few of the council members walked out in protest because his invocation wasn't God-centered. Herb Silverman contacted some of the councilmen to try to understand their reasons for walking out. "Councilman Gallant gave me a biblical justification from Psalm 14:1: 'The fool says in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is not one who does good.'" I personally like the sentiment of Herb's invocation but it clearly was secular.

There is an ongoing tension in every generation between that which is traditional and that which is emerging in new ways. How many of you mechanically recited the Lord's Prayer this morning? (Many people raised their hands). How many would be upset if we changed the language of the Lord's prayer? (Many more raise their hands.) The Christian movement and community were constantly reinterpreting the Jewish traditions and customs. The scripture passage that Fred read is about the tradition of the elders of the ancient Jews. The custom of washing hands went back to the earliest Hebrews' purity rituals established in the Torah. It wasn't just about physical cleanliness, but about what is commanded by God. The ritual was performed with the understanding that the ideal of holiness demands a special, ritualistic washing of the hands. The blessing that is used today goes something like this:

*"Blessed are you, L-rd our G-d, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us concerning the washing of the hands."*

As in so many religious systems, over time the Pharisees got bound by a literal and rigid following of the law. Jesus is aggravated, and it is not because of the tradition but because it has lost its meaning. He says, "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition. Thus you nullify the Word of God by your tradition that you have handed down." He quotes Isaiah saying, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." Basically he is saying they give lip service God but are not alive with the Spirit of God.

In an excellent article called "Tradition and Creativity in Theology," author and priest Avery Dulles writes, "The Christian mystery transcends past, present, and future; it rejuvenates those who come into contact with it." He goes on to quote French philosopher Blaise Pascal, who wrote, "The truths of Christianity are certainly new things, but they must be renewed continually; for this newness, which cannot be displeasing to God, any more than the old man can please him, is different from earthly newness, in that the things of the world, however new they may be, grow old as they endure; whereas the new spirit continues to renew itself increasingly as it endures." "The old man perishes," says St. Paul, "and is renewed from day to day."

Basically Pascal is telling us what Jesus was conveying to the Pharisee about hand washing. We are called to be renewed and transformed. We don't throw out traditions but they can be experienced and interpreted in new ways. We have this ongoing, issue between tradition, and living into what the Holy

Spirit is calling us to do, whether that be our missions, our church building, our new ways of interpreting ancient practices. We are called to worship God and not traditions. The past is continually informing who we become as a church, as a community of faith; but with the Holy Spirit we can't see exactly where we are going and it is uncomfortable. Now I have mainly been focusing on church traditions but we have all kinds of traditions in our lives and society. I probably don't need to tell you but our country has a tradition of racism! Racism has been conferred upon generation upon generation and we often just don't see it in ourselves.

This morning as David and I had our pre-worship time at the new Starbucks on Kipling and 38<sup>th</sup>, we noticed a car stalled at that intersection. An African American man and a young child were in the car. The African American man was waving the cars behind him to go on around. In the car was an older white man with snow white hair. He didn't move his car. The African American man then went over to him and the two seemed to have a short but warm discussion. The black man got back into his car and the older white man then carefully nudged his car against the bumper of the stalled car. Eventually the car got pushed across Kipling to a secure place. In that moment, I suspect, both men, transcended the ugly and harmful tradition of prejudice and fear. It was powerful. What tradition in your life needs transformation?

The call is to honor our traditions but also allow the Holy Spirit to guide us as we become a transformed and transforming community in the way of Christ.