

## SERMON LUKE 13 CHURCH TRADITIONS – GOOD OR BAD

May 21, 2023

On June 14-16, Lisa Isenberger, John Samford, and I will be attending the annual business meeting of the New Mexico Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. The major items on the agenda are the approval of the budget for 2024, how our Shared Ministries are funded, committee assignments, and the appointment of pastors for the coming year. Of course, some controversial issues always come up. With this in mind, let's discuss some of the traditions good and bad of the church in general this morning. As our biblical reference, let's look at a story from the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Luke and see what we can learn and apply to the church today. I will be reading verses 10 through 17 of Luke 13.

Read Luke 13:10-17

Now this is an interesting story. The Son of God heals a crippled woman, who had suffered enormous pain and hardships for 18 long years. This was a wonderful, loving and merciful act by the Lord Jesus. But look at who is the first person to object and criticize this gesture of love, the local religious leader and the head of the synagogue. He plainly states that it is okay to heal the sick and care for the needs of our neighbors during the week, but not on the Sabbath, not on Sunday! He would have loved the Blue Laws in the South when I was growing up.

The Pharisees of Jesus' time made the everyday life of the people extremely difficult by all their rules and regulations. As we have discussed before, they had taken the Ten Commandments and created hundreds of manmade rules to ensure compliance with them. As human beings, we like to tell others how to live their lives; we like to be in control. In this story, the Pharisees had taken the fourth commandment which says you are to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy, and had developed numerous ridiculous rules trying to define what can and cannot be done on this day. For example, you could not walk more than 1,000 steps on the Sabbath, light a fire, or carry anything except religious items for worship.

Remember that Jesus came to simplify this by stating that there are only two essential commandments: love God and love your neighbors. The religious leaders back then had lost sight of what was really important – their relationship with God, and instead focused on their rituals and procedures. In a sense, the leader of the synagogue in this story fails to see that he too is bent over, crippled by his numerous manmade rules and regulations, and unable to truly enjoy the relationship that God offers to all. Now we may criticize these Pharisees for their ridiculous rules and regulations, and wonder how they could have been so misguided, but if Jesus was physically here today, what would He say to us about our traditions, our rules and procedures? Are we modern day Pharisees? Do we worship our rituals more than God?

You know that we as the church can be our own worst enemy. If you study the Protestant Reformation, you see that the church was in constant turmoil, with debate after debate over

doctrine, theological issues, worship styles and the daily operation of the church. Many of the decisions and actions were made either by committee or the person in charge. Thus, many of the church traditions are manmade, some of which may not be even based on any biblical reference. Sometimes you wonder if God was even consulted on some of these decisions.

There's an old saying that if you don't learn from the past, then you are doomed to repeat it; history repeats itself. As time has passed, churches have continued to adopt or modify traditions that are based more on manmade decisions and desires than on God's Word. In the time we have this morning, let's look at some of these traditions, both good and bad.

As we have discussed before, the Methodist Church recognizes only two sacraments: the Lord's Supper and Baptism, both of which are directed by the Lord Jesus Christ and both have a divine promise from God to those who participate. While all Christian churches celebrate these two sacraments, have you ever looked at all the different approaches. In the Lord's Supper, Jesus told us to take the bread which represents His body and the wine which represents His blood in remembrance of Him, in remembrance of all that He has done and is doing for us. However, unless I missed something, there is no prescribed way in which the elements are to be served. The Bible does not say what size or type of cup you should use, if you should use a loaf of bread, wafers or tortillas, or if you should use wine or grape juice, or as we discussed two weeks ago who is allowed to take communion and who is not.

One of the debates during the Reformation was whether you kneeled or stood up when you received the elements of Holy Communion. Over the years churches have adopted different approaches for receiving communion. In some of our sister churches, the elements are passed around as you sit in the pews. In other churches you come forward and the pastor or priest gives you the elements as you stand. We follow this approach on the first Sunday of the month. But which way is the right way? Who knows, but I don't think God really cares; the key is what's in your heart and not the method. Last week, Bruce, Judy and I participated in the mass at the Feast Day at St. Joseph Mission School. There were similarities in our liturgy and rituals, but there were also some major differences. However, I felt that God was present in the celebration. What really matters is not the ritual, but what is in the heart of each person.

The same is true for baptism. Despite what some denominations will insist on, there is no specified method directed in the Bible. The Gospel accounts only say that Jesus came up out of the water. It does not say whether He was immersed, or how the deep the water was; the Jordan River could have been as shallow as the Rio Grande is at times. But again, the key point is our motive; what is in our heart, do we truly believe and have we accepted Jesus as our Lord and Savior. We are not saved by baptism; it is the public acknowledgement that we have accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Hopefully, Christ comes into our hearts long before the water goes over our heads.

It is kind of like the story of a little six-year-old boy who told his mother that he had been baptized. His mother knew that he hadn't formally been baptized, so she probed further into the issue. She asked him to explain what he meant by being baptized. He told her that last night in the bathtub he put his face under the water and thought about Jesus. He had the right understanding; it's all about Jesus.

One of the early debates in the church was whether infants should be baptized. Some groups do not believe that children should be baptized since the child cannot make the decision for themselves; however, as Methodists we believe that persons of any age can be baptized since Christ's body, the Church is a great family that includes persons of all ages. When a child is baptized or christened, the parents vow to raise the child in the Christian faith until they can make the decision for themselves.

On the day that the Church was born at Pentecost, Peter preached in Acts 2:38-39: "Repent, and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and **for your children.**" Remember what Jesus said in Mark 10:14 – "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." God has given little children a special place in His kingdom. I know that I have truly enjoyed baptizing my three grandchildren.

Another tradition of the church instituted by Peter at Pentecost was proclaiming the gospel, preaching the Word of God as contained in the Bible. I love to hear a good sermon; one that is biblically based and God inspired. I grew up with the Bible and it has truly been a lamp unto my feet as the psalmist stated. The Bible is the primary source for our Christian beliefs. As Methodists, we believe that the Bible is God's Word and should be interpreted based on our tradition, common sense and experience. But did you know that there are churches this morning where sermons are being preached without any reference or basis on the Bible? Each Sunday I pray that my message will be true to God's Word and its intent. This is the tradition upon which the Church is built and we must never forsake it.

Now the Lord's Supper, baptism and proclaiming the Word of God are long established traditions that are embedded into the history and the foundation of the church, and are some of the reasons that the church has endured for over 2,000 years. However we, like the synagogue leader that Jesus criticized, sometimes have let our own ideas and personal desires creep into the church structure, and over time they unfortunately have become traditions. While Jesus honored the Sabbath, the Gospels tell us that He often healed on the Sabbath. For He understood that honoring God's Day included making sure that those living on the edge of society were also included in the healing and teaching ministry of the church.

It appears that the religious leader in this story was more concerned about the animals than he was this poor woman. To him it was okay to water oxen and donkeys on the Sabbath, but when the Son of God offered healing to a stooped over woman, he protested. Now here is where we as a church have to be very careful. Are we more interested in protecting our donkeys and oxen than caring for those individuals who are living on the edge? When Judy and I lived in Santa Fe, an attempt to construct much needed affordable housing was blocked by those more concerned with protecting the prairie dogs living on the property than the people who were living in less than standard housing. Also, when we were in Grants an attempt to develop a homeless shelter was blocked by the city fathers who stated that they didn't have a homeless problem despite the dozens of people sleeping on the streets every night. Are we so set on our own agendas and so inwardly focused that we are blind to the needs of those around us?

Many churches today are more focused on their own desires and needs than the world and community that Christ has called them to serve. They worry about stained glass windows, the color of the carpet, the type of music, worship style, financial status, and not the needs of God's children. Over time many local churches have developed policies and procedures that hinder their service to God. They are from the same school of thought as this synagogue leader. They are self-centered and inwardly focused; and can't understand why they are dying; why their membership continues to decline; and why they are in financial trouble. If we are to continue to grow as a church and do God's will here in Rio Rancho, we must always be service oriented and outwardly focused.

An unfortunate tradition or practice of some churches is their attitude of exclusion. Have you ever attended a church where you didn't feel welcome, like you were invading their private home; people stared at you as if you were from the other side of the tracks? I may have shared with you previously an experience that Judy and I had on vacation several years ago. We were at Edisto Island, a beach in South Carolina. There was a small beautiful Methodist Church on the island, and so we decided to go there on Sunday morning. We were greeted by only one person and sat down on the back pew since I don't get to enjoy that pleasure most Sundays. Well, a couple came up and asked us to move because we were in their seats; they said that they helped build that church. Based on that experience, I came back and suggested that we add "open seating" to the motto of the Methodist Church: "open hearts, open minds and open doors."

Dwight L. Moody once brought a pew full of boys and girls from the street to a church he planned on joining. The presence of Moody's guests so disturbed the aristocratic church that when he presented himself for membership the church board suggested that Moody take a month to pray about his desire to join their church. A month later Moody was asked by the board: "Did you follow our suggestion?" Moody indicated that he did. They then asked: "And

what did the Lord say?" Moody replied: "God told me not to feel bad about it, because He has been trying to get into this church Himself for the last twenty-five years." If we are to truly be the church God wants us to be, then we must open our doors and hearts to all He sends our way; even those like this woman who was bent over from years of suffering. Do you greet each person who comes in these doors? Do you know everybody here by their first name? Do you make everybody feel welcome?

Let us not forget the history and tradition that we have here at High Desert. This church has a rich history; let us build upon it. We also have a bright future, but this future depends on each one of us. For tradition is defined as practices and beliefs passed down from one generation to another. We are building the tradition and reputation of this church right now. Jesus is watching us to see whether we will follow His example of caring for our neighbors through acts of love, healing and service, or whether we will follow the Pharisee approach of the synagogue leader who was more self-centered and more in love with his rules and procedures than God. The church needs its traditions, but we must never let them and our rituals get between us and our personal relationship with God. Remember ours is not a religion or rituals, but a relationship. May our hearts, our minds, and our doors always be opened to God's amazing grace. Amen