

“Strange Bowl”

“... there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

While it didn't turn out the way I had expected, my experience in the Doctor of Ministry Program at Virginia Theological Seminary was very positive. One of my most vivid memories of the weeks I spent on the campus in Alexandria, Virginia is the daily chapel services that were usually led by the faculty in order to give the students (who were mostly parish pastors) a break from worship leadership. While the school is a seminary of the Episcopal (Anglican) Church, they sought to be inclusive of the diverse student body by incorporating the traditions of other churches in their worship service, including Lutherans. During one summer residency, the Lutheran Holy Communion service was scheduled for Friday; but a few days before this service, the lone Lutheran faculty member discovered that she had to be out of town, so I was approached and asked if I was willing to preside at this service. Since presiding at Holy Communion is something at which I am quite experienced, I readily agreed; but when I arrived in the Chapel that Friday morning, I discovered that this would be a Communion service unlike any I had ever led, because this was a Lutheran Communion service planned by Anglicans. It started when I went back to the sacristy to vest; because I hadn't brought any of my own vestments, the chapel staff provided me with a set of theirs – and far more vestments than I usually wear (thankfully, the chapel was air conditioned). When I looked at the bulletin, I noticed that the order of worship was based on the Anglican Communion service, which is somewhat different from our Lutheran order of worship. As I approached the altar, I noticed that it had been prepared somewhat differently from the way I set the table, so I quietly moved the communion ware to the places with which I am more familiar. But the biggest surprise came as I was about to begin the Great Thanksgiving, when the assisting minister approached me with a bowl of water and a towel. I had washed my hands before the service, but perhaps they weren't up to Anglican standards of cleanliness. I stood there for a moment, not sure what I was supposed to do; noticing my uneasiness, the assistant whispered, “just put your fingers in the bowl,” offered me the towel, and moved back. I later discovered that this strange bowl is a *lavabo bowl*, used in Anglican and Roman Catholic churches for the ceremonial washing of the celebrant's hands. The term is from the Latin “I will wash,” taken from the opening of Psalm 26:6: “*I will wash my hands in innocence, O Lord, that I may go in procession round your altar.*” While priests are not required to use a lavabo bowl before they preside at the Lord's Supper, what was a strange bowl to me has become a tradition in many of their churches.

While I haven't used a lavabo bowl since that day, I can assure you that I do wash my hands before worship, and generally try to practice good hygiene throughout the week. I make use of hand sanitizer when I visit in the hospital and in nursing homes, I wash my hands before meals, and I try to be conscious of not passing on germs among the many people I visit. When we distribute Holy Communion, we make use of sanitizers, and in our Friendship Meal ministry we follow the strict guidelines of the health unit in preparing and serving meals in a healthy fashion. We might even pass the strict standards of the Pharisees, who disapproved of the behavior of Jesus' disciples who evidently “*were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them.*” (Mark 7:2). Jesus is once again confronted by his frequent nemeses: the Pharisees, who represent Jesus' local opposition (“*The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.*” – 3:6) and the Scribes, members of the religious establishment in Jerusalem (“*And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.’*” – 3:22). In this episode, the conflict between Jesus and his opponents begins with a question of ritual purity. The “defiled hands” with which the disciples are accused of eating has nothing to do with hygiene; it is seen as a violation of the “tradition of the elders,” oral interpretations of the Mosaic Law which the scribes and Pharisees considered authoritative. As Mark explains in a parenthetical aside, “*the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the*

market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.” (7:3-4). As strict followers of these traditions, the scribes and Pharisees confront Jesus over his seeming lack of devotion to these teachings: “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” (7:5).

But Jesus is aware that the question is not an innocent one; it is meant to indict Jesus, accusing Jesus of not following the Law, acting as if he believes himself to be above the Law. The implication of this question is that if Jesus does not teach his disciples these rules of piety, he cannot be a religious teacher: *“Their question seeks to embarrass Jesus in front of the crowds and thus undermine his authority as a teacher.”* (PHEME PERKINS). So instead of responding directly to their question, Jesus responds with a rebuke from Isaiah: *“This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.”* (Isaiah 7:6-7). Jesus accuses them of being “hypocrites” because they *“abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”* (7:8). This reproach is more than a condemnation of empty worship practices; *“it is a condemnation of the scribes’ and Pharisees’ distortion of tradition in order to circumvent the law. Jesus is not rejecting the law; in fact, he is rebuking them for their failure to uphold it.”* (Elizabeth Webb). Unfortunately, the lectionary omits the next paragraph, which is critical in understanding the basis for Jesus’ rebuke of his opponents. Jesus’ accusation that the scribes and Pharisees have placed “human tradition” above the commandment of God is based on the practice of *Corban*, a practice of willing assets to the Temple so that they may no longer be used for the care of one’s family, including elderly parents. Jesus contrasts this human practice with the commandment of God regarding parental care:

- “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have from me is Corban’ (that is, an offering to God) – then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.” – 7:9-13.

Jesus is accusing his opponents of exploiting a religious loophole *“by which you can declare your wealth an offering to God and thereby not have to share it with your parents”* (David Lose). Jesus is challenging them to consider how their adherence to tradition may be compromising their mission as the people of God.

As our lectionary resumes, Jesus calls the crowds and urges them to *“Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”* (7:14-15). It is not a matter of whether or not people follow the “traditions of the elders” that will determine their purity or defilement; rather, it is what comes out of them that will serve as a witness as to whether or not they are living as God’s holy people: *“Whatever your practice, Jesus is saying, whichever traditions you do or don’t uphold, these are not the things that, by themselves, get you ready for God’s kingdom. And you must be ready now.”* (Webb).

As is often the case, the disciples at first do not understand Jesus’ teaching; so in another part of the story that is omitted from the lectionary, Jesus provides further explanation: *“Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?”* (7:18-19). Unlike food that simply passes through one’s system, that which is produced in the heart – which is understood here as the center of human will and rationality, the place from which all our intentions arise – affects the whole person. Defilement does not come from what food a person eats, or how a person washes their hands, or whether or not a person is a strict adherent of the “traditions of the elders.” Defilement is what comes out of a person, the outward manifestation of inward corruption: *“For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from*

within, and they defile a person.” (7:21-23). While he does not completely reject human traditions, “Jesus continues to uphold the commandment of God, which his opponent undermine.” (Perkins).

Every human society and organization is governed by its traditions, ideas and practices that determine what is acceptable and which identify the body’s uniqueness. Some traditions may appear strange to outsiders (like that “strange bowl” I encountered at VTS’ Chapel), but they mean no harm to those who neither understand nor practice them. But the problem with human tradition is that they can often take precedence over what is more important, what is essential for a body’s identity and vitality. For the scribes and Pharisees, the “traditions of the elders” had taken prominence over obedience to the commandment of God, to the point where they were blinded to seeing how their practice of Corban was disobedient to the commandment to honor one’s father and mother, which means that *“we are to fear and love God, so that we neither despise nor anger our parents and others in authority, but instead honor, serve, obey, love, and respect them.” (Small Catechism).* For Christians of every age – including our own – it’s a matter of discerning what traditions are so important that *“it preserves our sense of the orderliness of the world and shores up our identity and therefore can’t be touched” (Lose)* and what traditions stand in the way of our fulfilling God’s mission for us as the Body of Christ. Our traditions have helped to mediate the faith to us in countless ways – but *“what if Jesus is calling us to put our mission ahead of even our most cherished traditions? What then?”*

The determination of the proper place of tradition within the Lutheran Church goes back to the very origins of our movement in the 16th Century, in which the Reformers spoke of traditions that are *adiaphora* (taken from the Greek word *adiaphoron*, “a thing that makes no difference”), matters not essential to the faith but permissible to Christians and allowed in church.

- “[*Adiaphora* are] ceremonies and ecclesiastical practices that are neither commanded nor forbidden in God’s Word but have been introduced into the church with good intentions for the sake of good order and decorum or to maintain Christian discipline.” – Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration: Article X.

For the Lutheran Reformers, *adiaphora* were a means through which the church determined what was essential to the faith and what was permissible but not mandatory for salvation: *“There is, then, a difference between the gospel which brings salvation and human traditions which do not. To know the difference means to be a truly free Christian.” (Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson, Lutheranism).* Determining what is the difference between essentials and *adiaphora* is a continuing challenge for the church: *“What are adiaphora is a decision the church must make at various times in various places.”*

- “Therefore, we believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every time and place has the right, power, and authority to change, reduce, or expand such practices according to circumstances in an orderly and appropriate manner, without frivolity or offense, as seems most useful, beneficial, and best for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the building up of the church.” – Formula of Concord.

According to the old joke, “How many Lutherans does it take to change a light bulb?” **“WHAT DO YOU MEAN ‘CHANGE’?!”** We Lutherans can be justly proud of our 500 years of tradition and heritage that have sustained the church and enlivened its mission. But the challenge to our church in this and every age is *“to claim and test its heritage and keep on rising from the dead.” (ELW Hymn 729).* While many of our traditions are ones that we cherish, we need to take a careful look at them to determine if they are *adiaphora*, not necessary to our life and mission, and perhaps even detrimental to our fulfilling God’s mission in this age. As the “traditions of the elders” had become a roadblock to the people of Jesus’ time walking in obedience to the commandment of God, we need to discern if our traditions have become a stumbling block rather than an aid in our walking as children of the light, being the means through which God’s love is shared with others:

- “What is we’ve come close to worshiping the traditions instead of the God they were supposed to point to? And what if Jesus is calling us to put our mission – whether to care for our aging parents, feeding the hungry, opening the doors to the homeless, making our building available to after school tutoring, sharing the Gospel with folks much of the church rejects, partnering with the community to care for more of God’s children, whatever – what if Jesus is calling us to put our mission ahead of even our most cherished traditions? What then?” – Lose.

I’ve encountered many more “strange bowls” throughout the years of my ministry, local traditions and customs that are a cherished part of a particular congregation’s life that appear strange and unfamiliar to me. It’s not that there is anything wrong with these “strange bowls”; what is important is that we understand why they are a part of our tradition, and whether these traditions still make sense in our current context. Our traditions must always be in the service of the mission of the church, which is to *“proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”* (1 Peter 2:9). When our traditions serve God’s mission among us, they can be useful tools in fulfilling God’s purpose for our congregation; when they become the focal point of our life together, then they can be an impediment to the fulfillment of God’s Will and must be set aside. Human traditions are like Isaiah’s description of the temporary that exists alongside of that which is eternal:

- “The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.” – Isaiah 40:7-8.

The Word of God is the “solid rock” upon which the church is built; all else is *adiaphora*, the “sinking sand” that can never replace what only God can provide. Amen.