

“Pure Religion” – Stephanie Wing, 8.30.09

One of our favorite family films when I was growing up was "Fiddler on the Roof." This wonderful musical opens with Tevye, the main character, explaining how the Fiddler on the Roof keeps his balance. The answer, he says, "I can tell you in one word - Tradition!" You see, everything in their lives is governed by tradition - "how to sleep, how to eat, how to work, how to wear clothes." Tevye says, "For instance, we always keep our heads covered, and always wear a little prayer shawl. This shows our constant devotion to God. You may ask, how did this tradition get started? I'll tell you.... I don't know. But it's a tradition. And because of our traditions, every one of us knows who he is, and what God expects him to do."

This small, early 20th century Jewish community in Russia struggles to maintain their religion and way of life against the encroaching influences of a changing culture and the external threats from an anti-Semitic Tsar. Tradition is the glue that holds them together, much in the same way that tradition held together the Pharisees and Jews of Jesus' day. You see, the Jews were forever changed by the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE. From the time of David they had Jerusalem as their main holy city, and from Solomon's reign, the Temple as the central place for worship and devotion to their God. The Temple was a physical representation of God's presence among them, and of their identity as

God's chosen people. But after the exile into Babylon and the destruction of the Temple, they had to struggle to understand in new ways their status as a community and their relationship with God. Never again did they have the same kind of political power. Thereafter they were a minority people, struggling to live out their religion faithfully, against the mainstream culture and social and political pressures. Personal piety and religious tradition in the community held them together and set them apart, and as the years went on, ritual and tradition became more and more important in their lives and religious devotion.

It is easy for us to read the New Testament, and the Gospels especially, and criticize, along with Jesus, the Pharisees. It is easy for us to look critically at their restrictive legalism. But those traditions, and the legalism, developed over many years as a way of embodying their faith in every way they could. The ritual cleansing and purification mentioned in our passage from Mark today was a physical practice of devotion. As they washed their hands and feet, the cups and kettles, they were reminded of God's call to live pure and holy lives. It also set them apart from the rest of society. It was a statement to all who observed their actions that they were choosing to follow the law of their God rather than the conventions of the culture. The practices also linked them with their ancestors. They washed as had their parents, and their parents' parents. Because of their tradition, they knew who they were, and what God expected them to do.

It's easy for us to criticize the Pharisees, but what Jesus was really concerned with was not the rituals themselves but the actions he saw that completely missed the point of the Spirit of the law, even if getting it correct down to the letter of the law. Jesus wasn't saying that what we do is unimportant, but rather that what is in the heart is more important.

Much of the theology in the New Testament emphasizes the freedom from the letter of the law through Jesus Christ. The emphasis is on faith, not works, and this message was a rally cry during the Reformation. There is nothing we do that secures our own salvation – we are totally reliant on God's free gift of grace. If we were to try to keep the law to the letter we would fail, and ultimately we would miss the point. The letter of James can be a bit uncomfortable for us in light of the letter's focus on works and actions. In fact Martin Luther argued that the letter was too problematic to be part of the New Testament canon.

Placed next to our passage from Mark, however, James gives us a "Side B," for those of us who remember and perhaps still use records and cassette tapes. If Side A in Mark calls our attention away from the outward actions and appearances that turn out to be done in vain, Side B in James calls our attention to the outward actions that *are* important, according to our faith in Jesus Christ. James 1:25 talks about the law in different terms: "But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act--they

will be blessed in their doing." James tells us we must walk the walk and not just talk the talk. The law that James refers to isn't the set of legalistic requirements followed so closely by the Pharisees. It is the law of the spirit of Scripture. James tells us that what we read in Scripture, the good news that we have in Jesus Christ, should change the way that we act. It doesn't call us to empty ritual, tell us what to eat or how to dress, and yet it should change the way that we live, and set us apart as followers of Jesus Christ.

Our passage from James ends with a definition of "pure religion" - to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. The charge to care for orphans and widows, to advocate on behalf of the oppressed, is something that appears often in the Bible, in both Testaments. If we are holding our lives up to the mirror of Scripture, we must ask ourselves how our lives are responding to this charge. One way we respond is in our collection of a 5th Sunday offering that goes to Bellewood and Buckhorn to support their work across the state. We have responded in the past by opening a Food Pantry, starting Habitat for Humanity, and in the ministries to family and children that have happened through this church.

But what about keeping ourselves "unstained" by the world? This isn't telling us to avoid dirty work. Often the work we are called to do will cause us to get our hands, feet, and clothes dirty. Rather, the "pure religion" that keeps us

"unstained" by the world is marked by integrity. Integrity is a grand word, but hard to define. It is the characteristic we look for in our leaders. But what is it? It involves honesty and uprightness. But more basically, integrity refers to a holistic moral and ethical code of behavior. In other words, to behave with integrity is to behave in all areas of life according to the values that we hold important. It means talking the talk and walking the walk. There is a direct correlation between our beliefs and our actions. We act the way we act because of what we believe. As Christians, it means we act the way we act because of the life-transforming power of the grace of Jesus Christ.

How easy is it for Christians to "blend in" to our secular society? Quite easy, it turns out. In contrast, most Jews and Muslims observe certain holy days that require them to change their routine; to fast, to cease from work, or to otherwise separate themselves from the daily grind. Most other religions have specific laws that govern the lives of their adherents, but Christianity really doesn't. We have the law to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves, but with very few exceptions, Christians tend to avoid the kind of legalistic restrictions of other religions that dictate anything from what to eat to what kinds of clothes to wear. As Paul says, "in Christ, everything is permissible - but not everything is beneficial."

Yes, it is easy for us to criticize the Pharisees, but perhaps we could learn from them, as well. There wasn't any aspect of their lives that wasn't in some way shaped by their faith. Their actions communicated that kind of integrity. It is easy to compartmentalize our lives, isn't it? To live and act one way at work, one way at home, one way at church, and one way with friends who don't share our faith. James argues, if our lives are really transformed because of Jesus Christ, how can that not be reflected in our actions? Perhaps you have heard the song, "They Will Know We Are Christians By Our Love." It's not always easy.

I am always moved and convicted by stories from people who have come to know Jesus because of the witness of other Christians. I heard a story about a prostitute in Philadelphia who was standing on a street on a cold, rainy day. Two members of a Christian community were walking to the grocery store and passed her on their way there. She propositioned them and they politely said no. On their way back, they saw the woman again, but she was huddled against a building, shivering from the cold. Their consciences' pricked, but they kept walking. However, when they got back to their house and realized the bread they had just gotten was moldy, they went back to the store, and on their way back home this time, they knew they couldn't pass her one more time without doing something. So they asked her if she needed some food and a place to get warm. She followed them home, and after she was fed and dry, she turned to them and said, "You are

Christians, aren't you? I can tell from the way your eyes shine. There is something different about you." She continued to pour out her life story to them, of her struggles, drug dependency, and abuse she suffered at so many hands. She ended up in tears, crying and rocking back and forth. Six months later, there was a knock at the door, and these same people opened the door to see a woman they didn't recognize. She said, "Do you remember me? I know you don't recognize me, because now I have shiny eyes like you do!" It was the same woman, who had in that time turned her life around and was now following Jesus.

I'm amazed by these kinds of stories, of people who so are so full of God's love that it just spills out in all directions, obvious for anyone with eyes to see. They display the kind of integrity, the pure religion, that James is talking about. They talk the talk and walk the walk, too.

But how do we communicate to the world the good news of God's love? We are a church that is Reformed and always being Reformed by the Holy Spirit. And sometimes the Holy Spirit will call us to move in new and different ways. We must look to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to discern how we are being called to walk the walk of our faith, and how we are being called as individuals and as a community of faith to show God's love to all of God's creation. Let us pray for shiny eyes. Let us ask God to be our vision, our wisdom, and ruler of all.