

IS IT LAW OR TRADITION?
Proper 17, Year B, September 3, 2006
Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close, Grace Church

This Labor Day weekend, we participate in a host of activities. Our traditions are celebrating the last day of summer ... and trying to cram in all the vacation we failed to take earlier in the summer. I feel sorry for those people at the shore with all this rain! Our consumer society has made this a weekend of sales. You can buy all the happiness you can afford! For parents, there is the joy of school starting soon. For the kids, there's the joy of school starting?!

When I was growing up, I spent a lot of time on my grandparents' farm. This was a weekend of minimal chores and much needed rest! There were certain things that had to be done daily on the dairy farm, but Monday was a complete day of rest. It was a break before the busy harvest season. We would go into town for the labor day parade (have you ever been to one of those?), the fall fair and then gather with lots of family for food and baseball!

But what is Labor Day all about? What is its origin? How far have our traditions taken us from its first meaning? In the late 1800's, a movement led by workers was taking place. People wanted better pay, better working conditions and better jobs. Typical work days for people ranged from 10-12 hours six days a week. Pay barely provided for one decent meal a day. Peter Macquire, a machinist from Paterson, New Jersey, and Matthew Mcquire, a carpenter from NYC organized a parade of American workers in NYC. Families and workers celebrated the day that recognized their contributions to American life. In 1894, President Grover Cleveland made the first Monday of September a national holiday to honor labor.

Today, our traditions have moved far from the original meaning of Labor Day. Where are the parades? Where is the recognition of workers? Why have our traditions obscured the original meaning? In just a mere 100 years, we have forgotten why Labor Day is a holiday. It's no wonder that after 2,000 years, we have made human traditions more important than Holy Scripture.

Today, we hear Jesus and the Pharisees going at it again. Now, remember, the Pharisees weren't bad people. They were the religious laity of Jesus' day. But in all their efforts, they had moved away from some of the most important meanings of what it is to be the people of God. We have heard elsewhere in the Gospel of Mark how the Pharisees attacked Jesus. Now they try something else. They go after his disciples.

At issue is the law, or God's way, or tradition, human ways. The reality is that interpretation of Holy Scripture has taken place for the entire existence of the Church. It was no different for the Hebrews. The rabbis, scribes and Pharisees spent a great deal of time interpreting the "law" (the first 5 books of the Hebrew Bible). They developed something called the Talmud. It is interpretation ... and all the volumes of it could fill a library the size of this church!

The problem comes when human tradition and will takes precedence over God's will! The Pharisees took things from the Bible and made them their practices. There is nothing wrong with this. It started as acts of devotion. The problem comes when they begin making rules for others. This becomes the "tradition of the elders." This tradition hardens into new laws that surpass God's law. Now tradition becomes more important than the Scripture.

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In Leviticus, ritual rules talk about laws for “cleanliness.” They form the basis of today’s dispute. The Pharisees complain that the disciples are eating with unclean hands. This is not about hygiene. The ancient people did not know about germs. The rules about washing developed around how to become “clean” (unstained by sin) so as to approach God in worship. What was unclean? All of us, gentiles, would be unclean. Anyone who handled blood was unclean. Women at certain times of the month were unclean. The sick, those with skin diseases and many others were unclean.

The Bible talks about taking a little water to perform a hand washing to become “clean.” This was required of priest before approaching the altar in the Temple. The Pharisees take this and make it a practice of self-devotion. This by itself is not a problem. The problem comes when they make it an expectation of how others will act and force the practice on them. What we witness in Mark are Christians beginning to free themselves from the Jewish law and traditions. These things are not needed for a relationship with God. Jesus shows them another way.

The Pharisees insisted on the tradition of the elders. This was nothing more than human interpretation, or opinions (borrowed from Rev. Charles Hoffer). Jesus dispute with the Pharisees is not over the torah, the law, but with the human traditions that moved from piteous acts and opinion to forced law. Their traditions have become more important than the law. Do you remember “Fiddler on the Roof”? The character played by Zero Mostel sings a song about tradition. He laments how his tradition no longer follow the traditions that he grew up with ... and the reality is that the world they live in does not lend itself to such traditions. Zero sings the song, but in the end he favors relationship over tradition, people over opinions.

Jesus attacks the Pharisees for their hypocrisy! This was a serious charge. He quotes a passage from Isaiah that denounces people whose outward acts lack a connection to a change of heart. When people are more focused on the form than relationship ... when they hold opinion more important than a changed soul ... we have hypocrisy. Jesus condemns the elevation of human opinion to sacred status. Therein lies the challenge for us today. It’s worth our time to question our traditions and see what is getting in the way of our relationship with God and each other.

Jesus continues to address the heart of the matter by focusing on the difference between things outside the person (traditions, acts) and things inside (at heart’s center). It’s not what we take in that causes evil ... it’s what comes out of us. Personal piety is not as important as ethics. The problem with piety is that it can become too personal, individualistic, opinionated and self-focused. This leads to religious duties and tradition becoming too important. This is where the Pharisees go wrong.

Ethics is about looking outward. It begins with a change of heart that changes our behavior, our relationships, and our interaction with others. Ethics demands that we be responsible, that we honor thoughts and feelings not only of ourselves but of others as well. Jesus challenges us to find a new heart and let that new heart be reflected in our actions towards others!

As Christians, we are called to live in a new way. We have to put tradition in its place. We have to stop giving into the saying, “We’ve always done it that way.” Tradition is not more important

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than Scripture. It's not more important than caring for others. Jesus calls us to a new tradition, a change of heart that demands our living into a new law ... the command to love. Our efforts must seek to conform to God's will and expectation.

Perhaps we could start with today, Labor Day. Let's thank those who have made our lives easier. Let's pray for those who grow our food, including the farmers, migrant workers, and grocery store clerks. Give thanks for the people who build our homes, from the lumber people, to the carpenters, plumbers and electricians. Give thanks to the gas station attendants, the store personnel and those who wait on us in the restaurants. Give thanks for the doctors, nurses, aides, therapists and other medical staff that keep us alive and healthy. Give thanks for teachers, caregivers, school staff, police, fire personnel and others. When you meet a worker today, say thank you to them!

We are called to be people of the Christian way, followers of Jesus. Let's make sure our actions and behavior make it abundantly clear to others that opinions don't rule us ... but that the law of love does! Happy Labor Day weekend!