

15 January 2017

The Truth Is . . . Faith of Our Fathers

Job 8:1-10; Mark 7:5-8

In the book named for him, the man Job experiences great tragedy, even though he has always been righteous. This was not how it was supposed to work; traditional wisdom said that God would reward the righteous. Job complains to, and about, God, and receives this response from his friend Bildad. We read Job 8:1-10:

*Then Bildad the Shuhite answered:
2 'How long will you say these things,
and the words of your mouth be a great wind?
3 Does God pervert justice?
Or does the Almighty pervert the right?
4 If your children sinned against him,
he delivered them into the power of their transgression.
5 If you will seek God
and make supplication to the Almighty,
6 if you are pure and upright,
surely then he will rouse himself for you
and restore to you your rightful place.
7 Though your beginning was small,
your latter days will be very great.
8 For inquire now of bygone generations,
and consider what their ancestors have found;
9 for we are but of yesterday, and we know nothing,
for our days on earth are but a shadow.
10 Will they not teach you and tell you
and utter words out of their understanding?'*

I read a fascinating book last month, *The Discarded Image*, by C.S. Lewis. Now, you may know C.S. Lewis as one of the great Christian thinkers of the 20th century, but this book came out of his day job as an Oxford professor of Medieval Literature. It was about the worldview of the Middle Ages. And what a beautiful world they believed they inhabited. The earth was, of course, the center of the universe. Around the earth were concentric spheres, one for each of the seven planets, and one for the "Fixed Stars." Beyond this final sphere was God. These spheres nested inside each other like those Russian nesting dolls, with each sphere growing more perfect the closer it got to God, and the heavenly beings that inhabited each sphere were of greater and greater perfection. The first planet, closest to earth, was the Moon, and everything inside that sphere was imperfect, as a result of humanity's sin. Beyond the Moon was the universe as God had intended: immutable, unchanging.

Our sphere, though, the Sublunary Realm, was the realm of change, which leads to trouble, pain, and evil. Here in the earthly realm, change is influenced by four principles: hot and cold, moist and dry. Put these in a grid, and you get hot and dry (fire), hot and moist (earth), cold and dry (wind), and cold and moist (water). These four principles influence the climate, the

weather, health, and human personality. For instance a hot and moist person is dominated by blood, a cold and moist person is dominated by phlegm, and so on for the rest of the “Four Humours.” Everything fit together neatly, and most amazing of all, everyone *understood* how it fit together. The scientist and the farmhand both knew about the Humours and the celestial spheres. This worldview endured for well over a thousand years. This is the worldview that lies behind the writings of St. Augustine in the 5th century, and the one that lies behind the plays of Shakespeare written in the 17th century. How could any worldview last that long without significant change? Well, at least part of it is that for the people of that time, the source of Truth was tradition. This worldview had been laid down by “The Authors” – that is, those wise men of old who had written books. That’s where our word “authority” comes from; it’s the testimony of the Authors, who are trustworthy. And the older the Author, the more trusted that person was. New Authors – I mean like those writing within the last two hundred years – were regarded with suspicion. This was the worldview of Europe for over a millennium. It was beautiful. It provided unparalleled stability, and it was shared by all. We’ve never had a worldview that worked so well, and we never will again.

You see, there is beauty and stability in the Truth provided by tradition. This is what Bildad appeals to in the passage from Job we read earlier. Bildad represents the ancient wisdom tradition, which began with the belief that the world was orderly. Good people were rewarded, and evil was punished. It was how God worked. But Job, a righteous man, had lost everything. Even his children had died. So Job complains of this injustice, and Bildad, representing tradition, hastens to hush him. Such talk is just “a great wind.” “Does God pervert justice?” No! Maybe Job’s children had done something to deserve their death. In any case, you can’t base your theology on just *your* experience: “inquire now of bygone generations.” As he points out, our lives are brief. We must trust the collected wisdom of our ancestors. They will tell us what to think. And if you do trust in them, then you see that if you really are righteous, God will restore you. You can almost hear the nervousness in Bildad’s voice, as if Job is tugging on a loose string, and Bildad is afraid that if he keeps pulling on it, the whole tapestry will unravel. “Stop! Trust the ancients! Their teaching is what gives us stability!”

We still seek that traditional stability in the past. I read an article this week about Mount Airy, North Carolina, Andy Griffith’s hometown, which has consciously set out to model itself on Mayberry, the fictional town of The Andy Griffith Show. It appeals to the memory of that better and simpler time of the 1950s and 60s, when everyone went to church, even young people, neighbors took care of each other, tradition mattered, and the world just felt more stable.

We read from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 7, verses 5-8.

⁵So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, ‘Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?’ ⁶He said to them, ‘Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

*“This people honours me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;*

*⁷ in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.”*

⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.’

When I was describing the worldview of the Middle Ages, that beautiful, clockwork worldview that held sway for over a thousand years, you may have noticed one small problem: it's wrong. There aren't just seven planets. And none of them, except the Moon, which isn't really a planet, revolve around the earth. Climate, medicine, and human psychology are more complicated than just the interplay between hot and cold, moist and dry. Yes, this lovely structure provided stability and a common mindset for dozens of generations, but it's not true.

And then there's Mount Airy, North Carolina. So, as I said, I was reading about this nostalgic tourist town – they even have a “Floyd's Barber Shop,” just like in the TV show – but then about halfway down the article, I read an interview with someone who had actually grown up in Mount Airy in the 1950s. He said, “Sure, it was friendly and neighborly and everyone got along – so long as we colored people stayed in our place and only sat in the balcony at the movie house and didn't try to sit at the counter in the diner.” And that, too, was a part of the tradition. And it was wrong.

That was Job's problem with Bildad, too. Yes, he knew the wisdom tradition that Bildad had appealed to. And so long as he had been rich, he'd believed it: “Of course the righteous are rewarded. Look at me.” But it no longer worked. Job hadn't changed, but his circumstances had. He'd lost everything, for no discernible reason, and he wasn't going to close his eyes and pretend that his reality was different than it was just so that he could cling to tradition. He wasn't going to let go of the loose string just to make Bildad feel better. He was going to pull. If the tradition was wrong, then the tradition needed to be changed.

Which brings us to Jesus. In Mark 7, the Pharisees get all up in arms because Jesus' disciples aren't keeping all the traditions regarding handwashing. Now to be clear, these rules are not from scripture but rather are additional rules made by religious leaders supposedly to *clarify* scripture. Kind of like the United Methodist *Book of Discipline*. And Jesus responds, “You hypocrites.” How dare they build up their own traditions, their own structures, and then elevate those inventions above scripture itself? “You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.” He is not saying that tradition is bad. Tradition has its place, and we need it. But don't raise it to the level of God, or even to the level of scripture, because tradition *always* derives as much from our culture as from our faith. And culture is often wrong.

This month I promised that we would talk about the concept of Truth. Last week I talked about the Truth of scripture, in all its glory and its danger. Its glory is that it was actually inspired by God and challenges us in ways no other book does. Its danger is that even the words of scripture are embedded in the cultural assumptions of the human authors. Well, if the Truth of scripture is limited, then the Truth of tradition is even more so. Scripture is revelation occasionally obscured by culture; tradition is culture occasionally elevated by revelation. But it is still a source of Truth. The wisdom of the ancients is not something to discard lightly. Bildad is partly right: we can't just take our own experience as normative and toss out the wisdom of generations. That wisdom is what gives us a solid place to stand in our search for Truth. When Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15, presents the heart of the gospel, he appeals to scripture but he *begins* by appealing to tradition: *For I handed on to you that which I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried and raised on the third day, according to*

scriptures. This Truth is both from God's revelation and from the wisdom of our fathers and mothers. Both have their limits, but both matter.

A closing example of tradition. Every church in America talks about its tradition of potluck meals. Every church says, “You know us [Methodists/Lutherans/Baptists/Whatever], we all like to eat. Well, there is Truth there. There really is something sacred about sharing a meal in the presence of God. The church that doesn’t eat together has lost something essential. Now, in the 60s and 70s, that tradition was expanded so that church meals required the inclusion of dishes made with Jello, including the ones made in molds shaped like fish that had canned tuna mixed in. Some traditions are evil, and must be changed. But the heart of that tradition is still true: eating together in community still matters. See you at Coffee Hour.