

Melva's Corner

Tradition or Transformation



May 28, 2007

(John 5:1-46)

Central Truth: Unless we get over some of our "hung-upness" about religion, we are going to continue missing Jesus. We won't see Him. We won't understand His words. We won't be able to reveal Him to others - and will, indeed, get in the way of His effort to make Himself known to them.

In an interview with a national newsmagazine several years ago, historian Jaroslav Pelikan - who taught on the faculty at Yale University from 1962-96 and authored more than 30 books related to his discipline - said:

Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. Tradition lives in conversation with the past, while remembering we are where and when we are and that it is we who have to decide. Traditionalism supposes that nothing should ever be done for the first time, so all that is needed to solve any problem is to arrive at the supposedly unanimous testimony of this homogenized tradition.

I thought of that quote as I began reading, studying and preparing this message from the Gospel of John. To be sure, this information about the healing of a paralyzed man, the challenge to Jesus about what he had done, and his response to the indictment can be appealed to for several important lessons. One could simply stress the importance of our doing more to imitate Jesus' concern for the sick, vulnerable, and suffering. One could pursue the theme of spiritual sickness, blindness, and insensitivity over against unresponsive limbs. Or one could trace out with great profit the bold claims Jesus makes for Himself as the Son of God in the exchange with His

critics. We'll give these only passing notice and focus instead on how easy it is for religion to get in God's way.

Religion Gets in God's Way

Every individual, every family, and every religious group develops traditions. From personal reading or TV habits to special holiday meals to focus areas for ministry, we evolve time-honored and customary ways of doing things. So far, so good. We need these habits and routines. They define us. They introduce our children into a culture. They help us know how to respond to challenges and new circumstances. They give us a sense of continuity with the past, a sense of depth, a sense of secure belonging. As Tevye says in *Fiddler on the Roof*: "Because of our traditions, everyone knows who he is and what God expects him to do."

Ah, but Tevye puts his finger on the problem with evolved human traditions in that statement. They are valuable. They steady and comfort us. **But they are not sacred divine expectations. They must always yield to the exigency of new situations.** Family rituals may, for example, become onerous and divisive rather than stabilizing if they don't change as family members alter their life situations. Children go off to college. Marriage demands the blending of two sets of family traditions. Grandchildren are born. Each of these situations demands a reshaping of rituals - or there is trouble. An inflexible soul who insists that everything must be kept as it has always been will soon be resented - even if catered to - by all parties involved. Someone is making a valued tradition into a soul-shriveling, anger-generating, absence-fostering traditionalism. What once helped stabilize a family can become a medium to destabilize it.

The same thing can be said about tradition versus traditionalism in religion. Leith Anderson tells the story of a Danish Lutheran Church where people filed in, walked to the front of the center aisle, and - facing a plain white wall - reverently bowed. Then each worshipper took his or her regular seat. A visitor was curious enough about the ritual to ask for an explanation, but neither laity nor clergy in the church seemed to know the origin or justification for the practice.

With the curiosity of several aroused now, further research

revealed that there was an elaborate painting of the Virgin Mary behind the layers of white paint on the blank wall. That painting dated back several hundred years to a time before the Protestant Reformation when the structure was a Roman Catholic worship center. When the church became Protestant and the painting was covered over, the worshipers just kept coming in and bowing. Generations later, the practice was still being perpetuated - even though the reason had long since been forgotten. Such is the power of religious tradition.

Some of the religious people in Jesus' time were so caught up in their traditions that they could no longer distinguish the event from its purpose, the original justification from its accustomed performance. Animal sacrifice, sabbath, and tithing were originally God's ideas taught to His human creatures. The mistake certain Jewish religionists made was to retain the form without the substance. And Jesus rebuked them with these words: "Go and learn what this means, **'I desire mercy, not sacrifice'** " (Matt. 9:13; cf. Hos. 6:6).

Traditions Over People

A case study to help *us* understand the meaning of this important principle involves a healing on the Jewish sabbath. John uses the episode with incredible skill to illustrate God's intention to use religion to bless rather than burden His creatures. Sabbath, worship rituals, tithing, sacrifice - all these external trappings of the faith taught via Moses were designed to bring God's love into the lives of people, not to regulate their behaviors and make God's words oppressive.

Understanding the design of the pool of Beth-zatha is important. Scholars had wondered for generations how it was configured so as to have **"five porticoes"** (5:2). When it was unearthed years ago, the mystery came clear. It was a huge, huge pool - bisected by an interior porch. In other words, it looked like two big rectangular pools put end to end. So the complete structure had the expected four porticoes, with one per side, plus a fifth that cut across and reduced the distance one would have to traverse to walk around it completely. Here is what happened there one day:

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids - blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me." Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath (5:1-10).

What an event! A man paralyzed for 38 years was walking home under his own power, with his beggar's mat under his arm! But somebody from a Taliban-like Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Elimination of Vice saw him and challenged his right to be carrying anything on a holy day. When the poor fellow replied that he was just doing what the healer had told him to do, the orthodoxy-protector set out to get clear on his identity. When it was discovered that Jesus was the healer in question, John informs us: **"Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath" (5:16).**

Incredible! A man whose limbs had been powerless for 38 years was well, and the legalistic religionists of Jerusalem set out to persecute Jesus rather than to praise Him, learn from Him, and further His ministry of compassion! And try to visualize this from the perspective of the healed man. His life had just been transformed by Jesus, but the joy of that event is going to be overshadowed by the legalism he is called to debate.

Jesus began His response to the legalists by telling them, **"My Father is still working, and I also am working" (5:17).** God sustains the cosmos constantly. He is sovereign over all people and all things without taking any time off. So, since Jesus is God enfleshed, He has every right to be who He is and to do what His nature calls Him to do all the time. He wasn't "breaking the sabbath" but simply being who He was - and modeling the truth for mortal onlookers that the sabbath rules had never been designed to prohibit kindness.

But are we reading too much into this to see His "My Father" as a claim to deity for Himself? Indeed not. The people present that day understood it so, and He didn't take it back or disclaim their interpretation of His words.

But Jesus answered them, "My Father is still working, and I also am working." For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God His own Father, thereby making Himself equal to God.

Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished. Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes . . ." (5:17-21).

Jesus or Religion?

Unless we get over some of our "hung-upness" - is that word? - about religion, we are going to continue missing Jesus. We won't see Him. We won't understand His words. We won't be able to reveal Him to others - and will, indeed, get in the way of His effort to make Himself known to them.

Yes, we must honor and live within the limits of Scripture. We must regard the written Word of God as authoritative. It is the single document in all the world that is God-breathed and capable of making known His will for our lives. Having said that, however, we must not forget that Scripture is not an end in itself. It is meant to point us to Jesus Himself and to call us to a personal relationship with Him. But if we are not very, very careful, Scripture will become an end instead of a means. We will fight scholarly battles over texts and tenses and put out each other's eyes so that neither of us sees Jesus - but we both feel holy for having fought. That is what Jesus told the people present that day: "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (5:39-40).

Jesus' fiercest opposition came from religious leaders who

viewed Him as a threat to their ability to run the religious establishment. They were respected theologians who had studied for years and who had built up a following of sincere students. I suspect most of them had good motives - at least originally. But they became the enemies of Jesus. But I'm not bringing this up to pick on Judaism in general or the Pharisees in particular, for the toughest opposition to Jesus Christ still comes from the legalism inherent in human religion.

It is time for us to choose Jesus over religion. It is time for us to seek and affirm personal-relationship-with-Jesus spirituality over hide-bound-legalistic religion. It is high time to learn the meaning of Christ's challenge about mercy over sacrifice. Rather than leave the challenge of this text vague for you, let me close with three very practical consequences of receiving this lesson.

Conclusion

The Pharisees of Jesus' day and the legalists of every generation work to make sinners feel uncomfortable and unwanted; Jesus is eager to accept them. Jesus associated eagerly with people the religionists of His time considered untouchable. Jesus' church has not always followed His lead, choosing instead to be an ingrown community behind stained-glass walls. If Jesus is light and if He has sent us into the world bearing witness to Him, there is no need to fear darkness. There is certainly no justification for avoiding people who are in the clutches of sin. [Note: Although not all suffering is the direct consequence of sin in the sufferer's life, this paralyzed man's appears to have been (5:14; cf. 9:1-12; Luke 13:1-8). He had suffered for 38 years, and the attitude of some must have been that we was getting what he deserved. That wasn't the attitude our compassionate Savior had toward him.]

The Pharisees of Jesus' time valued traditions over people; Jesus always valued people for the image of God He saw in them. The Pharisees of then and now persist in stressing "the letter of the law" and trying to dispense the artesian well of God's redemptive grace through the soda straw of their neat theological systems. A prime example of this would be the way our human zeal to protect marriage has made divorced and remarried persons feel like second-class Christians - if they are convinced they can be Christians at all.

The Pharisee-spirit trusts rules; Jesus offers us a relationship. While the animal sacrifices of Hosea's time and during Jesus' earthly ministry were commanded by God, many of the worshippers were convinced sacrifice was a way to buy God's favor rather than merely a grateful response to His love. Sacrifice never was the basis for approaching God, and those who understood and practiced it as such were guilty of reducing an intimate relationship to a legalistic formula. A legalist fears that overemphasizing God's love and grace will lead to license, but they are the ones who - by focusing on formulas, right actions, and church rituals - are presuming on God's grace. And Jesus was incredibly stern with such persons.

Religion put Jesus to death once! Then again. And again and again over time. It is time to put away human-controlled, rule-bounded, life-stifling religion for the sake of letting Him live.

Scriptural References:

"Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished. Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes . . ." (5:17-21).