

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B

Ah, the traditions of the elders. What a loaded concept that is! All cultures have a tradition of the elders, and they contain all sorts of things: the wisdom of the prior generations but also the unspoken (and often unconscious) attitudes, mindsets, and social norms of the majority.

It seems apparent from today's Gospel that not all those traditions lined up well with Jesus' proclamation of the Good News. He takes the Pharisees to task for their pre-meal rituals, not because it's a bad idea to wash your hands before meals, but maybe because such elaborate handwashing, etc. could work against establishing a community of fellowship around the meal. If suddenly handwashing (and properly, while you are at it!) becomes a litmus test, then someone will likely be left out.

The traditions of the elders cannot remain unconscious and unexamined if they are going to continue to bring life to a community. Especially in cultures that are experiencing a lot of change, the traditions have to be reviewed and brought into dialogue with the new things that are occurring. Will they still apply? Are they up to the task of incorporating new experiences and new realities? Or has their time come and gone?

As we get older, we can bemoan the fact that some of the traditions we grew up with are no longer observed, by the young often enough, but even by ourselves in many cases. I remember growing up that we boys were taught that we should always have a comb, a handkerchief, and a

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pocketknife with us. Made sense to us at the time. I don't think that's a thing anymore, though, is it?

It's important to be clear that the “traditions of the elders” are always traditions with a small “t”. There is the Tradition with a large “T” that is in a different class altogether. No one in today's gospel encounter is arguing against the 10 commandments. We proclaim the creed each Sunday and solemnity and have been doing so since the early days of the Church. We practice the sacramental life of the Church which was instituted by Christ and comes to us from the apostles. Those both are elements of the “large T” Tradition. They are integral to our identity as Christians. Other traditions? not necessarily. They may well be suited to a particular place and time, but do not rise to the level of the universal and timeless.

The Pharisees made the mistake of making all the traditions of their elders equal to the Law of Moses. And the people suffered. The religion became a straitjacket. Jesus knew the proper relationship between the essential and timeless Tradition of his people and those things which were momentary interpretations of that Tradition.

We are engaged in that constant necessity of living by the doctrine of our Tradition with a capital T, and in the light of the traditions of prior generations who did the same. No doubt there is a great amount of wisdom in those traditions. We can still find the value in them.

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And some of them have had their day. We must now move forward handing on to those who come after us the best witness we have to offer in the practice of the faith, and trust that they will know to recognize the wise and timeless in that, and carry it forward, while letting go of the things which no longer serve.

We will always be called upon to speak the truth in love. But the days of putting our hats in the pew clips or paying pew rent have passed.