

## *Traditions of Great Value*

James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27  
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

One of the most powerful influences in your life and mine is tradition. To a large extent, it determines the clothes that we wear, the foods that we eat, and the games that we play. A song from the musical “Fiddler on The Roof” says: “We have traditions for everything – how to sleep, how to eat, how to work, how to wear clothes. For instance, we always keep our heads covered and always wear little prayer shawls. This shows our constant devotion to God. Because of tradition, everyone of us knows who he is and what God expects us to do.”

That song had its setting in a fictitious Jewish community somewhere in Russia, many years ago. But with minor variations, it could have been written about you and me. Most of the things that we think and say and do have been profoundly influenced by tradition. This of course, includes our religion. The major portion of our Christian faith is deeply rooted in tradition. We would not even know about the revelation of God in Christ, if previous generations had not preserved the story and passed it along to us. We can be deeply grateful for this inheritance. But at the same time, we should be aware that not all religious traditions are of the same quality. Some have their origin in God and are absolutely vital. Others are mere human inventions and often prove to be more of a hindrance than a help.

Our Gospel reading for today deals with this distinction. It tells of one of the classic confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees. And the focus of their disagreement was the keeping of a religious tradition. The Pharisees were very scrupulous about the ceremonial cleansing of their hands before eating. Jesus and his disciples were not. So the Pharisees accused them of violating a sacred tradition. But Jesus turned the accusation around and said, “You (Pharisees) disregard God’s commandment and cling to what is human tradition.” This, of course, raises a rather obvious question – If some religious traditions have their origin in God and if some are expandable human inventions, how does one distinguish between the two?

I have no pat answers for that question. The Church has struggled with it throughout all her history and will continue to struggle with it as long as the world endures. But I do want to mention three great traditions that have always been a part of Christianity at its best.

For several years a virtual revolution has been going on within the church. Many things have changed, and many more probably will. But there are some things that must always remain. One is sincerity of heart. If we would do business with God, we must be real about it. Another is a life of basic virtues, such as honesty and faithfulness. In the Christian religion, there is no substitute for character. The third is caring for the weak and helpless. If we would walk with Christ, we must share His deepest concerns. Whatever else may change, these things must stay the same. They are three of the oldest and greatest traditions of faith.

*We Are Rooted in Faith, Hope and Love*