

“Breaking Tradition”  
Mark 7:1-8  
12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

August 15, 2021  
Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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During the course of this year, I’ve been in conversation with our staff about my vision, our vision for Westminster. They have been marvelous conversation partners about that vision. I’ll be sharing my thoughts with the Session during our stated meeting today, and I’ll begin to share them with you right now.

When I interviewed for this position back in 2018, the PNC was very clear that “Open Minds/Open Hearts” was part of the fabric of this congregation. I like that vision, I plan to keep that vision...the question then becomes, what does that mean for us, at this time in Westminster’s life?

How do we measure our decisions as a faith community of open minds and open hearts?

Perhaps some of you have seen FIVE WORDS posted recently on the video monitors that we have throughout the church. I’ve been discussing those five words with our staff throughout this calendar year.

They are five pillars, if you will—companies sometimes call them “core values,” we’ll refer to them as pillars—and I believe that these words will help define us, that will help measure the decisions that we make as a church community. What are those five words?

Hospitality.  
Generosity.  
Justice.  
Imagination.  
Joy.

Why these five?

First, they are biblical values. Each can be found in abundance throughout the Gospels, the writings of Paul, and the Old Testament.

Second, they are integral to my own life of faith. They were instilled in me by my parents, by pastors, by mentors and colleagues throughout my ministry, and they are values that are cherished by my colleagues on our staff team here at Westminster.

Third—and this is why I’m raising all this with you today, at this moment—I also believe they are already a part of Westminster’s DNA. I do not think they are NEW values. From everything I’ve seen, they are pillars that Westminster has upheld and live by for many, many years.

Hospitality:

- Think about the welcome that you felt when you first came to Westminster.
- Think about the welcome that we strive to provide neighbors, not just in worship but through IHN, our ministry for people experiencing homelessness.

Generosity:

- Every year, our Witness & Service budget is at least 25% of our operating budget, and many years it is more.
- Every year, I see our congregation not only give abundantly from our financial resources, but also giving generously of time and energy and love.

Justice:

- Think about the mission trips that we’ve taken to the DR.
- Think about the work that WPC has done and continues to do with Habitat for Humanity.

- Think about the blossoming relationship with our sister church in Cuba.
- Think about how Meals on Wheels in Greenville originated at Westminster.

We are a church with a long history of striving for a more just society.

#### Imagination:

This is a congregation that does not sit comfortably on easy answers. Faith is meant to be questioned and explored in our church. The Heritage Lecture series each January is an example of how we want to stretch our imaginations. Our children's ministry, youth ministry, adult education classes...all of those are splendid examples of how we try to let God's imagination guide us, for young and old and everyone in between.

#### Joy:

I've shared with you that when I was interviewing here 3 years ago, my wife and I visited a Westminster worship service anonymously one Sunday in the spring. And one of the things that caught my attention during that worship service was the JOY that's present here.

This is a congregation that laughs easily.

There is a marvelous music ministry here that instills joy in every heart whenever our choirs sing. During worship, I do not experience a weary and tired and dull group in the pews...I experience people who are eager to praise God, to learn about God, and to serve God faithfully in our world.

The word for this kind of eagerness is joy.

I'll be saying more about these five pillars during our sermon series this fall, which begins next Sunday. But I wanted to introduce them today because I believe that they are part of the TRADITION of this church.

You see, that's what our text from Mark today is about.  
Not these five pillars.  
But tradition.

The place of tradition.  
The value of tradition.  
The role of tradition in our lives of faith.

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In our text from Mark, the Pharisees chastise Jesus because his disciples are breaking tradition—failing to follow the proper purity rituals, and it's easy to hear this text and say, what's the big deal?

The disciples didn't wash their hands before they ate?!  
How is that sermon-worthy material?

But do not downplay the significance of tradition.  
We may not be the Pharisees of old, but we all have them.  
Traditions in our country, in our family, in our church family—that we hold dear.

During one of the first gatherings that I had with the staff here 3 years ago, I asked our staff if there were any "sacred cows" at Westminster, things that I should really think twice about before suggesting a change.

They gave a few answers, and one of them surprised me, although it does not surprise me now. Anyone want to take a guess as to what it was?

Donuts!

The tradition of summer donuts—don't mess with it, Ben, they told me. That is a sacred tradition at Westminster. And this has also proven to be good advice!

Our topic today is tradition.

It can be easy to hear today's text, and conclude that Jesus was not a big believer in tradition, but I don't think that's true. Jesus knew that tradition was integral to his own faith.

Do you remember when Jesus was asked which commandment is the greatest?

His response:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus did not come up with that out of thin air.

He was quoting scripture.

Love God with all heart, mind, and soul—that's Deuteronomy.

Love your neighbor as yourself—that's...do you know? Leviticus.

Jesus was answering from his faith tradition.

Luke tells us that when Jesus first began his ministry, he came to Nazareth, and "he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom."

Going to worship, being a part of his Jewish family of faith—that was essential to his tradition.

Think for just a moment about traditions here at Westminster—other than donuts—that are meaningful to you...

Singing “Silent Night” on Christmas Eve?  
 Participating in mission trips?  
 Being a church that welcomes everyone,  
     no matter their race or economic status  
     or sexual orientation or political affiliation...

There are so many traditions that define who we are.

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So, I’m inviting you to a couple things this morning.

Our subject today is tradition, and the first thing I’m asking is that you think about TRADITION in light of those five pillars I mentioned.

- How might they be a continuation of the faithful traditions that Westminster has practiced for close to 75 years?
- How might those five pillars serve as goals and guideposts for establishing new traditions in the years ahead?

That’s the first thing I’d like you to consider.

The second thing is a bit harder.

You see, Jesus is not announcing today that he is against tradition. But Jesus is reminding the Pharisees that tradition is not God.

In other words, there are times in each of our lives when tradition—the habits, the rituals, the customs in which we engage—it all has the potential to become an idol.

“You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition,” Jesus says to the Pharisees.

Let’s see if I can give you an example.

Not so much an example from this church, but more of a personal example.

Do you remember the parable of the prodigal son?

It’s going to be the first parable in our sermon series next week.

One of the reasons that parable speaks to me is because of the older son.

Like the older son, I’m often a rule-follower.

Like the older son, I’ve spent most of my life trying to do what I’m supposed to do, and want to get everything right.

Type A personality...there aren’t any of those in this room today, are there?

So, that elder son’s way of thinking is often my traditional way of thinking. Work hard, take responsibility for myself. Do what I’m supposed to do.

And none of it is bad...unless it becomes idolatrous.

Until it gets in the way, for example, of sharing in God’s joy—like at the end of the parable, when the father begs, pleads with his older son to join the party. All of which makes me think, are there ways in which my “traditional” Type A personality gets in the way of me joining God’s party?

Are there ways in which it prevents me from participating in God's joy?

Can I let go of my traditional "elder brother" way of seeing the world when it keeps me from seeing God's grace alive and at work in this world?

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Richard Rohr writes about a ritual that occurred in some post-WWII communities in Japan.

After the war was over, some Japanese communities realized that "many of their returning soldiers were not fit or prepared to reenter civil or humane society. Their only identity for their formative years had been to be a 'loyal soldier' to their country; they needed a broader identity to once again rejoin their communities as useful citizens."

So what did these Japanese communities do?  
They created a new ritual, a new tradition.

It was "a communal ritual whereby a soldier was publicly thanked and praised effusively for his service to the people. After this was done at great length, an elder would stand and announce with authority something to the effect:

'The war is now over! The community needs you to let go of what has served you and served us well up to now. The community needs you to return as a man, a citizen, and something beyond a soldier.'

It was a ritual, a new tradition that made a difference in how those Japanese soldiers would live the rest of their lives.

Rohr goes on to ask—what is the loyal soldier in each of our lives?<sup>1</sup>

What part of our identity has traditionally served us well,  
but can no longer serve us in the same way,  
and so we need to change?

That's the SECOND thing I'm asking you to consider this morning: what tradition in your life, in my life needs to change?

Ah, I can hear some of you thinking right now—change...yeah, this is one of BEN'S favorite traditions. Preach about change, talk about change.

And it's true.  
I do like to preach about change.  
Not because I'm an expert at it, but that's because I think it's what Jesus calls us to do.

Oh, we might like to tell ourselves that we're fully baked, at my age, you can't teach an old dog new tricks.

I had a parishioner tell me that once—  
I'm fully baked, he said to me.  
Can't teach this old dog new tricks.

And I didn't reply what I was thinking at the time.  
You know what I was thinking at the time?

That's not the gospel!

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011.

The gospel of Jesus Christ says that no matter where we are in the midst of life's journey,  
we can change,  
we can grow,  
we can release our "loyal soldier"—

That "loyal soldier" may be...a need to always be in control—it serves you well, until it doesn't serve you well.

Your "loyal soldier" may be a desire to always climb the next ladder in life, even when there are no more ladders to climb.

Your "loyal soldier" may be an unconscious commitment to keeping busy—running here, running there, never stopping to consider and nurture the relationships that matter most in your life...

The gospel of Jesus Christ says that you can release your loyal soldier. That you can always teach an old dog new tricks...

I once heard the preacher Fred Craddock tell of the time he met a dog that had learned a new trick.

It was a greyhound...you know, the kind that they race at the tracks. There's that fake rabbit they send around the track, and those dogs just chase it and chase it.

Sometimes those greyhounds get destroyed when they're done racing, but Dr. Craddock met a woman who couldn't stand the thought, so she adopted a bunch of those greyhounds. Had these big ol' dogs all around her house.

One of the greyhounds was laying on the floor of the living room. It had a child tugging on its tail, another kid was trying to ride the dog, but the dog didn't care. It just loved being a play toy for those kids.

As Dr. Craddock describes it, he got a little curious. He says he went up to that greyhound, and he said to the dog:

“So, are you still racing?”

And the dog replied: “No, no, I don't race anymore.”

“Really? Don't you miss the glitter and excitement of the track?”

“No, no.”

“What's the matter, got too old?”

“No, I've still got some race in me.”

“Did you not win?”

“Won over a million dollars for my owner.”

“Did you get injured?”

“No, no, no...”

“Then what happened?”

“I quit.”

“You quit?”

“Yeah, I quit.”

“Why did you quit?”

“I discovered that what I was chasing was not really a rabbit. And I quit.”

And then the dog said,

“All that running and running and running and running and running...and what I was chasing—not even real.”

A whole new life...<sup>2</sup>

(Amen.)

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<sup>2</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, edited by Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001.