

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

June 3, 2018

Second Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 2:23-3:6

The Sabbath was created for humans; humans weren't created for the Sabbath. (Mark 2:27)

Now **that** was a serious mic-drop moment. There should be a "fire" emoji after that line from Jesus! What he is saying is that the legalistic roots of our faith should not keep us from doing what God wants us to do! When the rules of a faith community become more important than the love of God, things are clearly out of whack, according to Jesus.

OR, Don't let "the way we've always done it" become a barrier to doing what Christ wants for his church. Because the church is a place where our traditions run deep.

John Bell was serving his first church - it was the late 1970's on the border of England and Scotland. It was his first Sunday, and he was appropriately nervous and eager. He climbed into the pulpit, looked into the faces of his new congregation, also nervous and eager perhaps. He noticed they were all sitting on one side of the room - the side in front of the pulpit. He preached what he thought to be a fine sermon - not too academic, not too controversial - just right.

Well when he was finished with the sermon a strange thing happened. While they were singing the hymn, everyone got up, and moved across the aisle to the other side of the church and sat down again. John's first thought was that he had said something that set off this "moving aside" thing and he was quite unsettled. But it seemed quite normal for everyone, and he was received warmly after worship - no one pulled him aside with any concerns.

So he was left wondering. He located one of the Elders of the church (like Deacons) and asked about it. Why on earth did they all get up and move to the other side halfway through the service? Well the Elder didn't know. He asked a few others - no one seemed to know. Tradition was all they could come up with.

Then someone suggested they ask one of the longest living members of the church - she was "north of 90" and sure to remember! So John and an Elder paid her a visit, and after some chit chat and asking after her health and her family, they asked her about this tradition, of moving from one side of the room to the other after the sermon. And she smiled, and said that she certainly did know!

You see, back in the day they heated the sanctuary with a cannon stove, which was located right by the pulpit, so everyone sat over near it. Well, by the time the sermon was finished, everyone was so warm, that on the hymn, they all moved to the other side of the sanctuary. But they were still puzzled - *When was this?* they asked. *Oh long long ago*, she replied. *Okay, but we don't have a stove there now.... No*, she said, *we got rid of the stove in 1920's*.

What began as a practical thing, became a habit completely divorced from its origins!
And this happens all the time.

There is a practice in the Roman Catholic church of putting water in the wine during the preparation of the elements before serving them. Here's where that came from: In the ancient world (thousands of years before Christ), the Greeks added water to wine because it was often thick, gritty, and too strong. It was simply good taste to add water to wine before drinking it. The Romans loved all things Greek, so they adopted Greek manners and spread them to the lands they conquered. And even though it was not originally a Jewish custom to add water to wine, it became part of the Passover meal itself and, eventually then part of the Mass.

It was a few hundred years after Jesus, that a teacher in the church explained that the water represented humanity and the wine, divinity. Once you put the water into the wine, it's impossible to take it out again. Because of Jesus, humanity can never again be separated permanently from God. So the tradition remains to this day.

What was practical, became a tradition, and before long became a rule that the Roman Catholic Church follows; or in the case of John Bell's church, an **un**written rule that that particular congregation followed.

Approximately 1500 years had passed from the time of Moses and the Ten Commandments (the original law) to the time of Jesus. That's a long time! And with those years came generations of commentary, discussion, rules, and policies put in place expounding on just what God intended about "keeping Sabbath." And sure these were earnest people trying to live as they thought God intended, but as we heard in our reading, sometimes the "rules" trumped the "spirit."

Because as important as the law is, it is - and shall always be - a means to an end, a tool, a mechanism in service to a greater purpose.

And that's where these good religious folk - and many of us good religious folk today - get confused. We think that following the law (rules, traditions) is the point, and forget that the law (rules and traditions) was established to help others.

Jesus demonstrates how powerfully attached we are to the tradition of law and order at any expense. God created us to love and support each other, and gave us the law to help us to do that. However, it doesn't take much for our traditions to become so ingrained that they become obstacles to the higher purpose of our calling as a church - which is to put our neighbors needs above our own so that we are making sure that **all** God's children flourish.

And the danger is that as we busy ourselves with our fastidious keeping up traditions which are NOT serving God's purposes, we THINK we are (serving God's purpose).

And while there's nothing inherently wrong with moving from one side of the church to the other on the hymn after the sermon; and no one is harmed by adding some water to the wine used for Communion - I think understanding WHY we keep the traditions we keep is important. Which is what Jesus was trying to do. Because when we think about the WHY of our traditions, we're THINKING about them.

And that does two things for us - it deepens our attachments to them, OR loosens their grip on us:

Thinking about our traditions:

1. Keeps our faith and the way we practice our faith from becoming mindless. It keeps us more fully engaged in what we're doing. That's why we have the printed explanations for things we do in worship (Creed, Gloria, Doxology). Being able to say WHY we do something one way rather than another; or why we prefer this over that gives us insight into ourselves and each other. It enriches our experiences and enables us to go deeper in conversations with each other.

A number of years ago, the Deacons were considering using plastic cups instead of the little glass cups we used for communion. We talked about the reason to switch (faster clean up after church), and the reasons NOT to switch (environmental concerns with more plastic). But then the conversation got interesting - and lively! - because someone said, "And I like that sound that it makes when we put them in the little holders afterwards." You know that sound - and I see heads nodding! It's like that sound somehow punctuates the moment and we have another moment of shared "communion."

But more importantly, knowing that that is a beloved sound to us, and now that I've mentioned it here, it's even more widely acknowledged, deepen my experience of Communion with you.

Thinking about our traditions also

2. Opens our minds to possibly changing the way we do things. Because perhaps the reason for doing something no longer exists, giving us permission to then do a new thing.

When I came here, it was our practice to have the greeters be the one to hand out bulletins, which I'd never seen before and seemed quite awkward to me, with all the crowding of that space, and going to take off coats, and herding children to the bathroom before worship. I asked about and no one was quite sure why. Finally someone shared with me that there was a greeter who was uncomfortable greeting and needed something to do with their hands, so they gave them the bulletins to hand out to have something to do.

As we talked about it, it seemed wiser to ask people to serve as greeters who are comfortable simply greeting, and making things easier on people as they arrive by giving them their bulletins as they enter the sanctuary. Knowing why, enabled us to make this simple but effective change in how we do things.

Because if our minds remain closed regarding the practical things, then the risk is that they'll grow closed to the matters of the heart.

While neither of these things (using glass or plastic communion glasses, or where we hand out bulletins) really matter when it comes to fulfilling our purpose as a church in *Sharing Christ ~ Changing Lives*, it is possible for us to become so rigid in either making policies and rules about how things are done; or in unwritten expectations of "how things are done around here" that we become a church that is more concerned with itself than loving others.

I remember years ago here, it was one of those warm spring nights, and there was a lot going on at the church.... one group was leaving and others were starting up..... a person with a dog was picking someone up and had come inside the church.... it was a mix of church people and the outside group renting our space.

Well, the next day, a person from our church contacted me saying, *I think we need a policy to keep dogs out the building.*

How will we be the place where healing and feeding and loving in Jesus' name is happening when we're concerned about dogs crossing our threshold? When we're too fixated on the small things, we will miss out on the big things.

I have seen churches that legislate the love right out themselves. And I don't think that's what Jesus wants for his church.

I'll say again today the three questions I mentioned last week which serve as a measure of how well we're living our purpose:

- Are we including everyone?
- Are we valuing people over things?
- Are we caring for others more than ourselves?

Good questions!

Let's not ever stop asking them - and evaluating everything we do around here by them.

Amen.