

## SUPERFICIALS



Mark 7:5 "The Pharisees and the scribes asked Jesus, 'Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?' (Jesus) said to (the Pharisees), 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; teaching human precepts as doctrines. You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.'"

As some of you know, I grew up in a lovely Episcopal parish in Houston, Texas, across the street from the beautiful campus grounds of Rice University. The church itself was a grand baroque structure modeled after a famous church in Venice; Santa Maria dei Miracoli. Growing up in that parish, the Rector's distinctive Texas drawl sounded to me as a child like the voice

of God, where the choir, of which my father was a paid section leader, sang angelic music that haunts me still, where the vestments and hangings were beautiful satin brocade, changing colors with the seasons, where my mother like to linger outside the church after the service to watch the wealthy members come down the high steps of the church in the latest fashions and into their chauffeured limousines, and where everyday families like ours flocked to events within the walls of this well-established and active congregation.

As I watched these grownups model religion for me as a child, I noticed their fascination with little details and tasteful ceremonies. Many worshipers would arrive early and go through personal rituals before the service, like lighting a votive candle at the side altar, or genuflecting and crossing themselves in the aisle before being seated, followed by whispered preparatory personal prayers, and then a hushed silence among all once the candles on the altar were lit. The altar book was ceremoniously moved with great drama from the "Epistle Side" to the "Gospel Side" during the Gradual Hymn as the crucifer and the candle-bearers led the Gospel Procession way down the center aisle. People stood and sat and knelt at various times, much to the dismay of my Methodist mother, or turned this way and that as needed, before everyone processed humbly to the communion rail to receive the grace of God.

I was fascinated as a child by the mystery of all this ritual and detail. Once my mother stopped attending with us, because there was too much 'up and down' in the Episcopal Church (she said), I used to sit with a knowledgeable friend who taught me what to do, when to bow or to kneel or to just sit still, a friend who helped me find my way through the old 1928 Prayerbook, and told me the meaning of much of what was done. When I entered young adulthood, perhaps not surprisingly, I felt called to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church. I wanted to claim this heritage as my own, and to make this Christian family mine.

At Seminary, as I studied the Bible and Church History in depth, I did field work at St. Paul's, K Street, a famous Anglo-Catholic parish in Washington where such matters of worship and community life also had deep meaning for the congregation. Still, I learned that different parishes had different rituals, but each was seemingly very important to them, each was some kind of expression of who they were as a people of faith, and of how they connected to God. Thus a classmate of mine in seminary once asked a group of us Anglo-Catholics a different and difficult question, saying simply: "Do you think God really cares?" Does God really care about how we do ablutions after Communion, about how or who ceremoniously cleans the vessels on the altar? Is there really a 'right' or 'wrong' way to do that.

Does God really care whether the bread of Eucharist is leavened or unleavened, whether it is embossed with a cross, or just plain, or even real bread? Does God really care whether Communion is taken in hand or placed directly upon the tongue, or whether we kneel or stand to receive it? Does God really care whether women covered their heads at church as they were still required to do in that day, or whether we used the Nicene Creed or the Apostles' Creed at that church?

I understand that we worshippers sometimes make much of these kind of details, because they help us relate to God, because they are signs for us pointing beyond the immediate to a mystery that we simply cannot quite grasp, because we are small-minded people who can't bear God's immensity. They also help us form community and identify ourselves. But over the years, I have grown disenchanted with all the fussiness, with the brocade and the lace, with the overly pious manners and elaborate rituals, and especially with the sense of self-righteousness that we as a community, we do 'it' right, or at least we do it better than others.

By implication, my old classmate was asking, who is really doing the caring here? Do we care because we can control such human things, because we can define ourselves by them, or because we think God wants us to do it exactly this way or that? Have we fabricated a religious world like the Pharisees,

populated by "manmade precepts" and "human traditions," grounded in our definitions of what little we, as mortals, can really comprehend? And when the Spirit of God tries to show us more, when the Holy Spirit tries to move us deeper into the Presence of God – as Jesus promised – do we turn away and instead cling to what we know, and what we can control, and what is easy and familiar?

We have fulfilled the Gospel, we think. We have honored God with our lips, but I fear that our hearts are often far from God. My old parish church, I learned years later, did virtually nothing to help the community in which they found themselves. Like so many large urban churches, they served only themselves, they offered elaborate and wonderful programs for *their* families, for *their* children, *their* youth, and they always did so with great taste and class. In fact, I found out in time that my old church even bought up adjacent houses in the community, rather than allow black families to move into their neighborhood. They started a day school when I was there, which I now realize was most likely to shield their members from a federally mandated integration of the Houston public school system. Their youth groups regularly make mission trips to help the poor in Central America, while neglecting the poor in their own city a few blocks away. Our religious life took place inside those familiar walls, on comfortable pews, as we tried to hold

onto to some imagined past, some familiar Anglican tradition of the way it has always been done, the 'way' it should be done, walls surrounded by our beautifully manicured lawns and gardens, which I now suspect were kept by underpaid undocumented Hispanic immigrants.

So I understand better now as an adult why Jesus had no patience for those "hypocrites" who fussed about traditions like hand-washing, while they manipulated worship at the Temple in Jerusalem with their money-changers, or who compromised with the imperial Rome oppressors of their people to enrich and protect themselves, while they did nothing for the "least of these," those self-righteous Jews who spurned the hated Samaritans as half-breeds and wanted nothing to do with the foreigners in their land, those Greeks and Romans, or the Ethiopian eunuch.

Fussy rituals like those in my old home parish said, "Look at me," rather than, "Show me your face, O God." Brocade and gilt said, "We have good taste," rather than, "feed the hungry." Superficial rituals kept us distracted from an intrusive God that wanted more from us, I believe, that wanted us to engage with the beloved people of God in the streets outside. Church traditions kept us safe from a Son of God whose name we couldn't bear to say out loud, lest we sound like those Baptists down the street, whom we thought used the Lord's name in vain, where it was always Jesus this, and Jesus that. Serving inside our walls

enabled us to keep the motley crew away and proceed in our worship with proper decorum.

It has taken me a lifetime to step away from this heritage of superficial things. I have also learned to deal with disappointment at the way my father, a devout man, hungered for faith in that church, but was caught up instead with the perpetual gossip of the choir members. I was distressed by the way that wealthy church pestered my poor mom for financial donations almost to the day she died. A superficial church isn't just silly; it can be abusive.

Jesus was determined to take people deeper in their relationship with God. He cut through traditions. He ignored familiar practices and prejudices. He openly broke the Law of Moses. Instead, he sent disciples out to humbly serve the people of God, to heal the sick, to forgive the penitent, to comfort the sorrowful, to be waiters and busboys as servants of the people of God. Jesus did not seek to found a new religion, to introduce new rituals and ceremony. He sought to change the way we lived our lives, and the way we treated one another. He built nothing that lasted – except a temple in our human hearts perhaps, where God could be truly worshipped, and where respect and dignity for others could flourish. As a priest, I get frustrated still by parishioners who want to know the 'right' way to do things in church, and who get impatient with me when I

say it doesn't really matter, that God doesn't really care whether we do it this way or that. Jesus wants us to be 'doers of the Word,' and not just 'hearers'. Jesus wants us to do good, and not just feel good about ourselves. He wants us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, love our neighbors as ourselves, rather than build beautiful monuments to ourselves, or to God. We are here to follow what our retiring Presiding Bishop Michael Curry called "The Way of Love," where anything and everything else is dross, is rubbish. If it is not about love, he says, then it is not about God. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, wrote St. James, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. AMEN.