

That's Not The Way We Do Things Here

Have you ever been in a situation in which you did something that you thought was perfectly reasonable only to be told by some authority figure that “that isn’t the way do that here?” This has probably happened to all of us at some time or another. It usually happens when we are new to a situation and don’t know the local custom. Maybe we sat at the “wrong” place at the table or stood when everyone else knelt. Custom and tradition are important to daily life. They are ways of maintaining some sense of order in our lives or of maintaining our cultural, religious or ethnic identities. A breach of how we do things here usually comes as a surprise to us and the consequences can range from mild embarrassment to mortification.

Unless, of course, the one upsetting the status quo is Jesus. In today’s reading, and not for the first time, Jesus upsets things at the synagogue, this time by healing a woman on the Sabbath. And he does it to make a point.

Before we go too far into the story, let’s mind ourselves of what it means to keep the Sabbath. One of the ten laws that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai was this:

8 Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9 For six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10 But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it. (Exodus 20:8-11).

Basically, the commandment tells us to follow in the footsteps of God, keep the day holy and rest.

Keeping the Sabbath must have taken quite an effort by the disabled woman. She was probably in pain. It must have been difficult to get around, being bent over and unable to stand upright. But she did on her Sabbath day what we are doing today. She attended services. She didn’t ask to be healed but when Jesus touched her and healed her, she praised God.

For the leader of the synagogue, keeping the Sabbath involved more than attending services. In another translation of this passage, he is referred to as the “President” of the synagogue, which probably made him a lay leader, not unlike a Rector’s Warden. Like leaders in most environments, his role includes enforcing the prevailing customs and traditions. It’s not an easy job and I must admit to having some sympathy for the position he was in. When he sees Jesus heal the woman, he reacts immediately to voice his indignation with Jesus’ breach of tradition. He sees the healing act as “work” and rebukes Jesus for working on the Sabbath.

To paraphrase, we don’t do that here.

Jesus uses the rebuke as a teachable moment. He points out the hypocrisy inherent in using the Sabbath rules to deny healing to a disabled person when it is common practice to care for the well-being of one's animals on the Sabbath.

What are we to take from this exchange? I don't think that Jesus is suggesting that we should not keep the Sabbath holy or that we should treat the Ten Commandments as the Ten Suggestions. He is, I think, making a more nuanced point, a point that distinguishes between human tradition and God's law.

Let's go back three chapters in Luke to a passage we heard just last month. When asked what one must do to inherit the Kingdom of God, Jesus asked what is written in the law. The answer, as we know so well, is that

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.
(Luke 10:25-37).

In loving our neighbor, we are loving and honoring the image of God that is in each and every child of God. It may have been the tradition in the community Jesus visited that day to do nothing but pray and rest in a good faith attempt to comply with the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy. But God demands that we keep the Sabbath holy, not just restful and inactive.

By healing the disabled woman on the Sabbath, Jesus shows us that this very act of loving kindness is an act of loving God, which is what Sabbath should be all about.

What would happen if we looked at all of our customs, symbols and traditions through the lens of loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves? Would they withstand that analysis? Could this even happen?

Before you dismiss this idea as being overly idealistic, let me remind you of something that happened just last summer. In the wake of the terrible mass murder at Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina, the people of South Carolina reconsidered one of the state's oldest symbols, the Confederate battle flag. By law and tradition, the flag flew over the Confederate Monument in front of the South Carolina State House. The confederate flag could not even be flown at half-staff, as other flags were, out of respect to the people killed at Mother Emanuel.

Because the killings were racially motivated, it is not surprising that display of the confederate flag quickly became the focus of public demonstrations and online petitions. To many people, the flag represented racism. I don't know what was in the hearts and minds of the members of the South Carolina legislature when they voted to remove the flag from public display. Perhaps the political view that the flag represented South Carolina's past, not its future, won the day. I would like to think that at least some of them considered whether their tradition with the flag fostered a love of God and love for their neighbors and concluded that it did not.

As followers of Jesus Christ, I believe we are all called to examine our own traditions, symbols and customs. Are we the hypocrites Jesus called out at the synagogue? Do we let our traditions get in the way being faithful to the word of God? When we look at our traditions through the wider lens of loving God and neighbor, we may be surprised at what we learn about ourselves, about our neighbor and about faith.

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