

Grace and Peace to you from our Triune God, who stirs in our hearts aspiration, contemplation, discernment, and healing.

Have you ever heard the story of great-grandma's pot roast? One day after school a young girl noticed her mom was cutting the ends off of a pot roast before putting it in the oven to cook for dinner. She had seen her mom do this many times before but had never asked her why. She decided to inquire. "Mom, what's with cutting the ends off your roast?" Her mom replied, "Well, I don't know. I guess it's what my mom always did. Why don't you go ask grandma?"

So the young girl went over to her grandma's house. She chatted with grandma a little and then proceeded with her question, "Grandma, why do you cut the ends off the pot roast before cooking it?" Her grandmother replied, "Hmmm. I'm not sure. That's just what my mom always did. Why don't you go ask her?"

Determined to get to the bottom of this, the girl went to see her great-grandmother at the manor down the road. She gave her great-grandmother a big hug and a kiss, caught up with her a bit, and then asked, "Great-grandmother, why did you cut the ends off the pot roast before cooking it? Grandma said she always saw you do it and now my mom does it too. Neither of them know why and I'd like to know the reason.

Her great grandmother let out a laugh, sighed, and shook her head, "Well dear, when I was first married, your grandpa and I had a very small oven. I had to cut the ends off because a full-sized roast didn't fit in my very small pan!

With this, the girl smiled and reflected on the lessons she learned. First, we need to consider how and why some rules originate. They may not be necessary anymore. Secondly, just because "we've always done it that way", doesn't mean we need to keep doing it that way, she concluded. And as she grew and started cooking for her own family, any pot roast she made from that day forward stayed fully intact!

This story--it makes me chuckle because it's so very applicable. We can apply it to everyday life. We can apply it to our Gospel reading for today. The point of the story is to make us aware of our tendencies. Often, we as humans are handed down a rule, a law, or codes for life--be that from our parents, teachers, or the institutional shaping of our society or culture. Down the road, the very intent of these rules or societal codes are altered depending on new contexts, shifting paradigms, and advancements in information or the like.

We cling to them, however, because it's all we know and then suddenly, we find ourselves admonishing people who don't fit in or follow this rule or that. People become outsiders if they don't assimilate or comply with what's become the norm or anything outside what's considered the status quo. The result of this is then an uprising of people who don't like to be outsiders who start questioning and redefining the norms. Then, the keepers of rules start to panic because cultural norms start to diverge and they no longer make sense to many who want everything to stay the same. These back-and-forth, cultural-shifting dynamics have and will always be human nature, especially as we become more exposed

to different people or cultures that do things differently and sometimes better than we do.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus is essentially confronting this dynamic and our human tendencies to look negatively upon difference or fear it all together. Here we have the religious leaders within Jesus' community attempting to scorn him and his disciples for not washing their hands before they eat, a societal expectation that wasn't established alongside the original God-ordained 10 commandments but instead became somewhat of a rule as Kosher laws started to shape the identity of Jewish culture.

For the Jews of Jesus' day, they actually had all sorts of purity codes that were originally intended to establish group identity and protect their community from diseases and harm. A lot of these codes are found in Leviticus and a lot of them are still followed by Jews as a way of life today. But also, keeping kosher was and still is a beautiful form of identity and never something non-Jews have to snide or fear. Our differences are God-sanctioned. We're not supposed to act and look all the same. Furthermore, in a world of empire that often forced or required the assimilation of people into the dominant culture, purity codes became all the more important for the Jews.

But then, for some religious leaders, the hand-washing expectation and other institutional rules eventually worked to exclude and ostracize people because some stopped fitting into the frames for "being" many Pharisees had constructed in their mind's view. This is what Jesus is responding to in our text for today. For Jesus, the original intent behind the Jews' cleanliness or purity rules had become lost on the Pharisees. Subsequently, so did the cleanliness of their hearts. Jesus wasn't saying, you shouldn't have your laws that define who you are. Again, social definitions were and are important to people groups and they were important to Jesus. He knew it's important to respect our elders, keep traditions, and follow in the footsteps of builder generations if traditions and what our elders have built are good, honest, and fair. But when what's being passed down aren't those things--when rules and codes exclude people, dehumanize people groups, and result in, from within us, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly, and fornication, meaning disingenuous engagement with other people--then that is when God says "not today!"

In this vein, let us consider the societal rules we often consider the norm. They may be rules that have been passed down to us by trusted institutional leaders, religious leaders, and especially our parents. Which of them serve to welcome people, highlighting our greatest strengths and kindest traits? Which do we want defining us as Christians or as Lutherans? The ability for us to put on a fine lutefisk dinner, for example. That sure sets us apart, does it not? But then, which of our norms, not just religious, perhaps invoke fear in others or cause us to fear or exclude others from entrance into God's assembly or society in any way? Acknowledging these, it would behoove us to consider the context from

which these laws or norms originally came and then ask ourselves if they make sense in terms of upholding them today.

We've done this for a lot of cultural laws in Scripture and beyond. I mean, how many of us like bacon and shrimp? In the book of Leviticus, pork and shellfish foods were forbidden and those who keep kosher still do not eat them. But if we Gentiles still adhered to all the laws in the Bible, we wouldn't have bacon-flavored toothpaste or ice cream! We wouldn't have the luxury of picking up a prepared shrimp cocktail platter from the grocery store when scrambling to bring something to a party! There are some laws that fit with the ancient culture of the Israelites who became Jews. Now, however, and for Christians, they don't really fit within some of our contexts anymore.

So, apart from the 10 commandments and the 2 Jesus gives us--to love God with all our heart, minds, and soul, and to love our neighbors as ourselves--there are some laws in Scripture we as Christians adhere to and some we do not. The same goes for laws in society. I looked up some weird laws still on the books in various states. Currently, in Arizona, it is against the law to have a sleeping donkey in your bathtub after 7 pm. In Georgia, a law from 1961 states you can't eat fried chicken with utensils! These socially prescribed laws both in Scripture and society beg the question, why are we so pressed to cling to some norms, phrases, or verses in Scripture or society and not others? So much of what we designate as the law is circumstantial, meaning they fit with a certain time or incident.

I'm also willing to bet those "laws" we adhere to have a lot to do with the unknown or our innate fears when it comes to people who live differently than we do. Fears evolve with the unsteadiness of change and the challenging of different ways of being we have come to deem "normal". I don't discredit any of these fears. I have them too. We all do. Yet, we're called to step back and take a look at the big picture. In Christ, we're called to see God as God really is--one who is slow to anger, merciful, and abounding in steadfast love for everyone--even people who live outside the box of what we prescribe as "standard." God as Christ didn't intend to exclude anybody. All were welcomed and have now been redeemed in Christ. What good news! Is it not?! And we get the joy of sharing that story out in the world today!

Here's a challenge for you. This afternoon, when you're home winding down after a Sunday brunch or stroll (or whatever you do on Sundays), take out your Bible. Read some of Leviticus and observe how God's early community used unique laws to set themselves apart from other communities in their time and context. Let yourselves be intrigued by the intricacy of it all and also notice which laws we as Christians adhere to today and which we do not. Then do the work of remembering our Scripture passage for today. Notice the ways Jesus challenged societal standards that forbid certain people from engaging in public life and, most importantly, God's assembly.

Finally, as you journey with Christ in search of God's heart and our calling to heal and not hurt people's hearts--consider what flows from us and comes out of our hearts in the form of words or actions toward others. Our words and actions are what matter to God as we engage with all of what is God's created beloved. Remember, there are some traditions we can hold dear but there are some norms we need to importantly shift and still shape today so that all may feel and know God's love. Let this be our work as we go about our days. Lord, let our hearts be good soil. Let love be nurtured in us and grow. Amen.