

Proper 17B'18  
2 September 2018  
Jas. 1.17-27; Mk.7.1-8; 14-15; 21-23  
St. Luke's Episcopal Church  
North Little Rock, Arkansas  
The Rev. Carey Stone

*O God of truth and peace, who raised up your servant Richard Hooker in a day of bitter controversy to defend with sound reasoning and great charity the catholic and reformed religion: Grant that we may maintain that middle way, not as a compromise for the sake of peace, but as a comprehension for the sake of truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. – Collect for the Feast of Richard Hooker*

In the Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, the main character is a man by the name of Tevya and is about a Jewish family living in Imperial Russia. Tevya tries to explain why he plays his fiddle while standing on top of a roof: *"A fiddler on the roof. Sounds crazy, no? But in our little village of Anatevka, you might say every one of us is a fiddler on the roof, trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his neck. It isn't easy. You may ask why do we stay up there if it's so dangerous? We stay because Anatevka is our home... And how do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in one word... Tradition."*[\[1\]](#)

Tradition is our very human effort to maintain our balance. It's how we make sense of our world and our place in it. We say to ourselves, "This is the way we've always done it, why would we want to change." So there's a tension that comes with tradition, a tension between maintaining our balance and equilibrium on the one hand, while staying open to the positive changes that inevitably come along in life. This can be a sticky business.

The Pharisees and the scribes (the religious leaders of the Jesus' day) that we read about in today's gospel weren't bad people but every time we read about them we find them getting stuck in tradition in an unhealthy way, to the exclusion of positive change. In this story we hear them grumbling to Jesus about his followers who failed to observe the several century tradition of washing their hands before they ate. The tradition that had developed for proper food preparation involved an elaborate system that involved using particular cups, pots and bronze kettles. This was all well and good if you lived in one place but for itinerant evangelists it was not very practical.

Jesus uses this as teaching moment to try and take his listeners to a deeper level of spiritual maturity. His wisdom revealed that by focusing upon tradition alone they would be missing the whole point, the heart of the matter was that it was the things on the inside not the outside of them that brought true defilement: Jesus said, *"For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, greed, slander, pride, etc. All of these things come from within, and they defile a person."*[\[2\]](#) As time moved forward this tendency to get stuck in unhealthy tradition continued to be the occupational hazard of clergy and laity alike.

During the time of the protestant reformation there became a real conflict between Catholics that wanted to emphasize the authority of following tradition and the protestants that wanted to emphasize following scripture as the only authority. The Latin phrase "solo scriptura" "by scripture alone" became their motto. Fortunately for us there was a third way, Anglicanism.

With the help of theologians like Richard Hooker there was discovered to be a middle way through the two extremes. The Latin phrase that has come to be used to describe this was "Via Media" "the middle way." Anglicanism, in addition to relying on tradition, and scripture as their sources of authority, added a third source, "reason." These three sources of authority in our church have come to be known as the "three legged stool." By adding a third leg to the stool balance could be achieved and maintained. Over time we have learned to rely upon our God-given reason in order to discern a way forward through conflict, disagreements and social upheaval and change.

There is a great example from scripture that shows how the Holy Spirit can work through all three to arrive at spiritual truth. One day Peter went up onto a rooftop to pray and meditate and he had a vision, he saw what appeared to be a white sheet coming down out of the sky and like a movie screen there appeared all the many different kinds of animals. One of the animals that appeared was a pig (which should hold special appeal for us Arkansas Razorbacks) and he heard a voice speak, "Get up Peter, kill and eat." *But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean."* What had the tradition been for hundreds and hundreds of years, no ham sandwiches, ribs or pork barbeque. But *the voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."* God was doing a new thing and if Peter had stuck with only scripture and tradition he would have missed out on a whole group of people (namely us, the gentiles) that were for the first time about to come into the community of faith, and guess what a lot of them liked to eat, barbeque!

Let's move things forward a bit, to the 1800's. Slavery had been traditional for thousands of years. There are over three hundred references in scripture that supported slavery. Many southern slave owners and preachers cited these to support their continuing to keep slaves. But again God was doing a new thing, through abolitionists in England like William Wilberforce and a bit later through American abolitionists and through president Abraham Lincoln and a host of others, there would be an end to slavery.

Let's move forward again to August 26<sup>th</sup>, 1920 when women were finally granted the right to vote by the US Congress who ratified the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment to the constitution. I noticed on *Twitter* that someone wanted to honor this anniversary by posting a pamphlet from the early twentieth century by a group know simply as the National Association OPPOSED to Woman Suffrage. The pamphlet outlined their six simple reasons why it was unthinkable for women to have the right to vote: 1) Because 90% of the women wither do not want it, or do not care. 2). Because it means competition of women with men instead of co-operation. 3). Because 80% of the women eligible

to vote are married and can only double or annul their husbands; votes. 4). Because it can be of no benefit commensurate with the expense involved. 5). Because in some States more voting women than voting men will place the government under petticoat rule. And 6). Because it is unwise to risk the good we already have for the evil, which may occur. Thanks to the efforts of Lucy Stone and other women suffragettes who believed that women had been created equal with men would not rest until justice was realized.

Later in the last century the Holy Spirit would stir the hearts of people to press for civil rights for African Americans. Thus ending a period of unjust Jim Crow laws and colored drinking fountains and segregation.

It would seem that the Spirit has been at it again on behalf of a group of people that find themselves, by no choice of their own to be attracted to their same gender. The Supreme Court has ruled in favor of full equality and the Episcopal church for over forty years has been on the forefront of this struggle for justice. Tradition can be a beautiful and enriching source of balance and joy but it can also get us stuck and cause us to close our hearts and minds to the new life of the Spirit. Theologian and writer Jaroslav Pelikan said it best when he said: *"Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."*

As Christians who follow Christ and rely upon the three sources of authority: Scripture, Tradition, and Reason ours will be a living faith. God didn't become silent after the last words written in the book of Revelation were written. Amen.

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[1] [http://lyrics.wikia.com/wiki/John\\_Williams](http://lyrics.wikia.com/wiki/John_Williams): Prologue\_And\_Tradition

[2] From Mark 7.1-8, 14-15, 21-23 NRSV

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***"Fear not that your life should come to an end, but rather, fear that it should never have a beginning." - Cardinal John Henry Newman***