

13 Pentecost - 30 August 2009 - Proper 17 B  
Song of Solomon 2:18-13; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23  
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20<sup>th</sup> century historian and author Jaroslav Pelikan once observed that, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; [while] traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." I read a story about a parish and their new interim priest. The Rev. Mr. Hall offers thoughtful and lively sermons, is quick to respond with pastoral care and attention, and his manner is a balance of reverence and comfortable ease. But people notice immediately that the Rev. Hall is not doing Holy Communion the way that they have always known it to be done. And as good a fit as he might be, some begin to wonder if Fr. Hall might be downright audacious.

In terms of audaciousness, the Song of Solomon, or Song of songs, is the one book of the bible that fits that description. Reveling in the gift of senses, and in the sensuality of creation, here is the lover celebrating the arrival and embrace of her beloved. And the book never even mentions God.

So it is that around the 1<sup>st</sup> century, as Jewish authorities gathered to determine the canon of the Hebrew Scripture, many contended that it the Song of Solomon is entirely irrelevant to religious life at all. Others were even more adamant that since the book celebrates personal passionate love between lover and beloved, the book is decidedly irreverent and cannot be regarded as scripture. Until a respected Rabbi defends it. "Heaven forbid," says Rabbi Akiva ben Joseph, "that anyone in Israel ever disputed that the Song of Songs is holy. For the whole world," he continues, "is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel; for all the Writings are holy, and the Song of Songs is [the] holy of holies" Largely due to him, then, the Song of Solomon is part of the scriptures, both Hebrew and Christian.

Centuries later, a handful of Christian scholars emerge who, like Rabbi Akiva, support a plain reading of the text as a love poem. Surprisingly, the two most prominent are 16<sup>th</sup> century reform theologian John Calvin and a contemporary of his, English Puritan Edmund Spenser. Nevertheless, the dominant trend in both Judaism and Christianity continues to be the domestication of the Song of Solomon by reading it as an

allegory either of God's love for the Hebrews, in the case of Judaism or, in the case of Christianity, of Christ's love for the Church. I cannot help but find it interesting then that here is this one book of scripture that the literalists insist should be read as allegory, and which the allegorists insist is best understood literally. Aside from something plainly enjoyable as a love poem, I think the book rightly challenges people to question commonly held assumptions about God, about what it is to be a person of God, and about that for which we prayed this morning as 'true religion.'

Back at the parish, the new interim priest is catching a lot criticism from folks for the way he administers Holy Communion. Finally Fr. Hall finds someone with the Altar Guild who may help him begin to understand. Miss Grace explains. "Fr. Dennis always used to do it like this, and I know the priest before him did it the same way." Fr. Hall watches as she takes the paten with the bread on it from the altar and, instead of moving to the altar rail, she steps back to a shelf at the wall behind the altar; then she moves from there to the rail. "I never knew why they did it this way," Grace says. "But I assume it had something to do with showing proper reverence for the cross hanging on the wall."

Neither inherently bad nor inherently good, no religious community is without traditions. A seminary professor put it to this way: "A group of people meet to worship together. They want to do everything fresh, new, innovatively, not bound by custom. So, they worship. Then, afterward, somebody says, 'I liked it when we did this,' or 'I thought it was wonderful when we said that. Let's do that again next time.' And thus," said the professor, a tradition is born." Traditions happen. This is important to know because traditions can also domesticate.

In their day, Jesus and his disciples have the audacity to eat with hands not first ceremonially washed. We hear in the Gospel reading for this morning that the experts on tradition are quite upset with them. And it is important to note here that the traditionalists are not upset because the hands of the disciples might be dirty with grit

and grime. Sanitation is not their concern. They are upset because the disciples and Jesus appear to be ignoring the customs, rites, and ceremonies that are the very livelihood of these Pharisees and other religionists. These customs, traditions, rites, and ceremonies are the very domestications that validate the authority that the Pharisees and scribes enjoy among the people. Knowing all about the right things to do and the wrong things, knowing all about how to do them the right way and how not to, is basically these experts' entire reason for being.

Is Jesus then opposed to the traditions of his day? Is Christ Jesus opposed to the traditions that people, like you and me, are using and enjoying still today? The real answer is much more subtle, isn't it, than a simple 'yes' or 'no'? The traditions of the religionists in Jesus day are pre-occupied with appearances. 'How does it look to people in general,' they may be wondering, 'for us to be having civil conversations with this itinerant upstart and his band of followers when he completely disregards the most basic rules of who we are as a people?' One can almost sympathize with Jesus' critics here. Is it really too much to ask that they wash their hands? And the answer is, No; it's not too much.' Unless and until our concern with whether or not they wash their hands, with whether or not they stand, sit, or kneel at the customary time, with whether they dress nicely enough or casually enough, - unless and until our concern becomes outward and superficial, and thus focused upon the easiest way for us to discover something about them to criticize so they we might feel superior to them and might cause them to feel unworthy of our companionship and deserving of God's Love.

The Rev. Mr. Hall is still confused about the tradition in this parish whom he is serving as interim that has his taking the paten with the bread from the altar to the shelf on the rear wall before moving to the people at the altar rail. Finally, he finds the most senior member of the parish. Walter is quite elderly and rarely if ever gets out to go to church anymore, but Fr. Hall is delighted to find that Walter is a font of knowledge. "Sure," says Walter, "I remember how that whole tradition got started. "And I can tell you, I don't know anything about it having it do with showing respect for the cross or something like that. In the old church building, before we got this one

built, we heated the thing with a big boiler and those old stand up radiators everywhere. Whenever our priest at the time" he continues, "would take the chalice of wine from the altar, he would stop first and touch the radiator near the altar to discharge the static electricity so he wouldn't shock the first person at the rail."

Fr. Hall is speechless. "After that, all the priests just kept on going to the heating vent behind the altar; and as far as I can tell, nobody ever thought to ask why they were doing it." Fr. Hall is stifling his laughter now. "Lot of things are different now, as I understand it," Walt muses. "The building doesn't use radiators anymore, and we even have lay people administering the chalice. But, thank you, Fr. Hall," says Walt with a wink of his eye. "It's good to know the important things never change."

Jesus knows that tradition is a gift when it serves true religion; and that when religion serves tradition, that is quite another thing. "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; [while] traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."

No community is without change. In a community such as ours, change happens. Change for which we plan and change that no one could anticipate, or would dare to, has happened to us in the past, has happened to us recently, and will continue to happen in our future. And where we have given God thanks for that change, and also where we have not been able to, nevertheless, we find that tradition happens, too.

And, thanks be to God, we find in our community no tradition so essential of our being, so central to our doing, so audaciously true to our religion as loving God, as loving neighbor as we love ourselves, and as treating everyone else as we would like to be treated by them.' In the midst of change, in the embrace of tradition, we find here, as do others seeking it with us, the lively tradition of the living faith of the People Beloved of the Loving God.

And so may Almighty God, who pours out upon us the richness of grace immeasurable, so fill us to overflowing that, through us, the world around us may bathed in the sweet mercies of Christ Jesus our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and for ever. Amen.