

A young rabbi found himself in the middle of a serious quarrel among his new congregation. During the Friday services, half the congregation stood for the prayers, and half remained seated. And each side shouted at each other about whether the prayers should be said standing or sitting. Each group insisted that theirs was the correct tradition, and they tried to rule the world around them by shouting and screaming.

Finally, the young rabbi took the problem to the synagogue's founder, a 99-year-old rabbi living in a nursing home. He asked the old rabbi whether the tradition has been to stand during the prayers. "No," he replied. Then he asked whether the tradition has always been to sit during the prayers. "No," the old man again replied. "Well," says the young rabbi, "What we have is complete chaos. Half the people stand and shout, while the others sit and scream." "Ah," said the old man, "THAT is the tradition!" (Source Unknown, in LECTONARY HOMILETICS, Jan 1996, p. 24)

First, some background on this gospel text. The Pharisees and scribes who gathered around Jesus were like fastidious amateurs who watch figure skating solely to note each flaw or poorly executed move. These experts in righteousness focused on the failure of the disciples to wash their hands before eating. Of course, a critique of the disciples was an implicit disparagement of their teacher, Jesus.

As so often happens, especially in matters of religion, the Pharisees' problem sprang from good practices that went awry and took on a life of their own. According to Jewish tradition, God gave Moses the law as a guide to help humans fulfill their vocation as collaborators in the work of ongoing creation. As we hear in today's first reading, the law pointed out the path to life and outlined the plan for establishing a holy nation. Observance of God's law would form the desert wanderers into a community that demonstrated the goodness of the God who called them into being. The law was essentially a blueprint through which the people of God would know how to further God's plan for all people. By collaborating with that plan, they would enjoy communion with God. That was the plan.

But that plan fell under the influence of competitive, scrupulous, self-righteous, legalistic human beings. In other words, it got interpreted by the likes of you and me. With the best intentions in the world, wise people developed customs and practices designed to safeguard the law by interpreting how it should be put into practice in everyday situations. From the command to keep holy the Lord's Day, there grew precise instructions about just which activities were and were not permissible on the day of rest, right down to the detail of when a candle could be lit. Only the priests were required to perform ritual washings (Ex 30:18-20; 40:31-32). But then teachers began to require this for everyone – something impossible for poor people with no running water in their homes. And so the law which was designed to be a path of holiness for all became distorted. People who wielded the power of interpretation developed precepts that effectively segregated the community. Those who had the wealth and free time to act holy could cite religious reasons for avoiding the unclean and sinners whose touch or presence could contaminate them and their sanctuaries. Jesus understood the law as a divine plan to bring humankind into union with God and with one another. Few situations moved Him to anger like the hypocrisy of people who distorted the law's intent. Obviously this is not a problem unique to the people of the first century. (Adapted from Mary McGlone, CELEBRATION, p. 1, 2 September 2018)

So, second, a word about tradition. Theologian Aidan Kavanagh said that "Tradition is not wearing your grandfather's hat; tradition is having a baby." It is a genetic imprint FOR THE FUTURE! The Church, like so many things in life, is not something we inherit from generations past or take over from our predecessors. The Church is on loan to us from future generations. (Matthew Kelly, REDISCOVERING CATHOLICISM, p. a) As

Catholics, we understand tradition as a wonderful guide, but not the whole answer for every little detail. Traditionalism (as opposed to tradition) is based upon the idea if you leave things alone and never change them, they will remain as they were. But this is simply not true. If we leave a thing alone, we leave it to a torrent of changes. If we leave a white post alone, it will soon be a black post. If we particularly want it to be white, we must keep painting it. Briefly, if we want the old white post, we must have a new white post.” (G.K Chesterton, ORTHODOXY, p. 115) “Tradition does not mean to hang on to the ashes, but to feed the flame.” (Cardinal Hoffner)

Healthy tradition is as much about the future as it is about the past. Any dynamic and growing life needs to engage with the past, for, as evolutionary theory shows, if a break with the past is too radical and lacks continuity, then things fall apart, and coherence and solidarity are threatened. Similarly, in the renewal of spiritual life there must be a mingling of old and new, a recovery of lost traditions, insights, memories, and truths, combined with an openness to the future and a willingness to grasp the vision of the new reality that is just beyond our grasp. This is what the Second Vatican Council was all about – recovering the authentic tradition, which required a certain discarding of things that had become stultified over the centuries. This striving for newness, for change that is beyond the limits of present concepts of what is possible, is a vital part of any true and vibrant spirituality. The church – and our spiritual lives – always stand in need of questioning by the Word of God, of self-scrutiny and constant openness to a further change of heart. If we ever think we are a finished product, we have already begun to die. The Church is never ‘at ease in Zion’ but always restless, always struggling. Tradition is a journey of pilgrims and sojourners who are never fully at home in this world, never adjusted to the values of any given order, but always seeking to be a community of contradiction and dissent, of prophetic call. To be truly traditional, we are always in quest of a better city. (Adapted from Kenneth Leech, THE EYE OF THE STORM, p. 213-214)

Third, where do we go from here? To overcome our hypocrisy and our over attachment to what we perceive to be the past, we need to live lives of integrity. What we are on the outside needs to match what we are on the inside. This, of course, is at the heart of the current scandal in the church. Priests, bishops, and cardinals presented themselves as one thing, but were something else entirely. I will address this much more in depth next weekend. But integrity is the heart of an authentic life. Jesus reminds us at the end of today’s gospel “From within, from our hearts, come evil or good.” It’s easy to say the words or to look pious. It’s much more difficult to live a life like Jesus Christ.

A man returned to his parked BMW to find the headlights broken, with considerable damage. There was no sign of the offending vehicle, but he was relieved to see a note stuck under the windshield wiper. It read: “Sorry. I just backed into your Beamer. The witnesses who saw the accident are nodding and smiling at me because they think I’m leaving my name, address and the particulars. But I’m not.”

Integrity is tough for all of us. Try being a preacher! My actions NEVER fully match my words in the pulpit. I am always aware that I am a hypocrite. Don’t ever take me as a standard for how to live like Christ. Only look to Christ. My problem is not just my lack of character; it is that I can’t even see how badly I lack it. We have an almost limitless capacity for self-deception. For instance, psychologists speak of a massive integrity blind spot in human nature called the self-serving bias. We make ourselves the heroes of our stories to exaggerate our role in victories and to absolve ourselves of blame for failure and error. In one survey, 800,000 high school students were asked whether they were above or below average in social skills. If they were accurate, they should have split 50-50. Want to guess what percentage of students rated themselves as below average? ZERO percent! Furthermore, 25 percent of all students rated themselves in the top 1 percent!

This self-serving bias extends to every area. The majority of people in hospitals suffering from crashes that they themselves caused rate themselves as above-average drivers. We might think that education would make us more self-aware. But we'd be wrong: 88% of college professors rated themselves above average; 25% rated themselves as truly exceptional. Another survey of 200 sociologists found that half believed they would become one of the top ten sociologists in the world. No wonder there are such conflicts around tenure and promotion.

National surveys show that we claim to feel 9 years younger than we actually are, and we claim that we look 5 years younger than other people of our age. I'm now 64. 4 years ago, I was in the gym around the time of my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. There was one older gentleman that always happened to be doing his routine at the same time as me. As age happened to be particularly on my mind, I thought "I wonder how old that old coot really is – he looks to be about 70." As it often happened, Charles and I would have a quick conversation about something rather trivial. He happened to mention something about age, and I asked him "So how old are you?" "53," he replied. "And how old are you?" he asked me. "Just turned 60," I said. "Oh I had you pegged for much older than that," he declared. You know Charles is just an idiot! I never really liked him anyway!

The Church is not exempt from this integrity issue, as our current situation clearly demonstrates. And perhaps most ironic of all – when people have the concept of self-serving bias carefully explained to them, the majority of people rate themselves as well above average in their ability to handle the self-serving bias! Another integrity problem is called the 'fundamental attribution error.' It works like this: If something good happens in my life, I tend to explain it by taking credit for it; but if I fail, I tend to explain by blaming circumstances. If I do well on a test, I think it's because I'm smart; if I do poorly, it's because I was distracted. If people like my preaching, it's because I'm a good preacher; if they don't like it, it's because they are obstinate or have the attention span of a fruit fly, or don't love Jesus as much as I do!

What makes the fundamental attribution error even worse is the way we explain the behavior of other people. We tend to explain our bad behavior in terms of mitigating circumstances; we tend to explain other people's bad behavior in terms of their character defects. If I yell at someone, it's because they have done something really badly in need of correction. If you yell at your child in a grocery store, it's obvious that you're an anger management problem waiting to happen who never should have been granted a parenting license in the first place. If I get a speeding ticket, it's because the police needed to fill their quota, so they set up a trap when they should have been out catching criminals. If YOU get a speeding ticket, it shows what a careless driver you are.

If we want even more evidence of our capacity for self-deception, read the survey by US NEWS AND WORLD REPORT in 1997, which asked people, "Who do you think is most likely to get into heaven?" Mother Teresa – 79% (apparently 21% of the respondents are really strict graders!) Oprah – 66%, Michael Jordan – 65%, Dennis Rodman – 28%, O.J. Simpson – 19%. One vote getter topped even Mother Teresa. One individual got an 87% shot at getting into the pearly gates. Want to guess who? It was the person completing the survey. Apparently people's thoughts ran like this: *Out of all the famous people in the world, I'd put Mother Teresa at the top, but there's one person I'd have to say has a better shot than Mother Teresa – me!* (adapted from John Ortberg, WHEN THE GAME IS OVER, IT ALL GOES BACK IN THE BOX)

When our inside and outside match – we are a person of integrity. The goal for all of us is to be able to say by the end of our life with St. Paul: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." May it be so for you and for me. Amen.