

Pentecost 12B – Proper 16B (8/23/09 – Tradition of Men ... Or Commandment of God)

In the Name JESUS. [Amen]

In many ways, our return to reading from the Holy Gospel according to St. Mark today continues down the same path as what we heard last week from the Gospel of St. John [6:51-59]. We have set before us today – from a completely different set of readings – the distinction between the temporal wisdom of the world and the enduring wisdom of God. Or, to put it in terms of this week’s lesson – we have the distinction between the tradition of men and the commandment of God. For it is certainly true that man’s traditions come from and are propagated by mere worldly wisdom, whereas divine wisdom is engendered and nourished by the commandments (the precepts) of God – both the precepts of His Law **and** the precepts of His Gospel. And as I warned last week: Do not think that such conventional, worldly wisdom – such traditions or commandments of men, as Jesus calls it – does not make its way into the Church. In fact, that is precisely what had happened to those Pharisees and scribes who came and questioned Him, as we heard.

One way that worldly wisdom – manmade tradition – has come into the Church at large is in the doctrine of Baptism. Apparently basing their teaching and practice solely on the English translation of the Bible, some churches insist that the only proper Baptism is by immersion. And, actually, assuming that they base their teaching only on a translation **IS** putting the best construction on it – because otherwise we would have to conclude that they are intentionally ignoring what the original Greek of our Gospel teaches about the word *baptize*. Now, you might wonder: *Where in the world is **this** coming from, Baptism isn’t mentioned – isn’t even in view – in our Gospel.* But it is, actually – when we look at what the Holy Spirit had recorded. Verses 3 and 4 say (literally): ***For the Pharisees and all the Jews, unless they wash their hands, do not eat, holding the tradition of the elders; and when they come from the marketplace, unless they BAPTIZE they do not eat. And there are many others things which they have received and hold, such as the BAPTISM of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.*** Here God equates “washing” with “baptizing” – that is, God teaches here how we may understand Baptism. Immersion is **not** the only way to baptize, since washing can also be called baptizing. So as Scripture itself teaches, Baptism by the washing of water – that is, pouring the water over the person ... as was typically done in hand washing – is perfectly legitimate. And just in case this connection between washing and baptizing is missed here, God elsewhere speaks of Baptism as a cleansing ***by the washing of water in connection with the Word*** (as we heard in the *Epistle* [EPH 5.26]) and the ***washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit*** [TIT 3.5]. Now, as I have often said, Baptism by immersion certainly

gives the clearest visual understanding of what St. Paul says happens in Holy Baptism – namely, that we are baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection ... buried in His grave and raised to a new life [ROM 6.3-5]. But to insist that Baptism by immersion is the **only** legitimate Baptism is nothing less than *teaching as doctrines the commandments of men* [MK 7.7].

Another way, unfortunately, that worldly wisdom and manmade tradition has made inroads into the Church is in the realm of marriage. Very sadly, in its Churchwide Assembly this past week (actually, that finished just about an hour ago), a church body that calls itself Lutheran has decided that it will make provision for their congregations to “recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable life-long, monogamous, same gender relationships.” It doesn’t use the word “marriage” precisely – but essentially the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is going to recognize what elsewhere has been termed “same sex marriage” – at least some of their congregations will ... it is left to congregational discretion. And the ELCA not only will recognize and support it in general, but also is going to permit those who are in such relationships to serve as pastors and in other public positions of the Church. It would seem that for a majority – at least 55-60% – Holy Scripture has become to them a sealed book that they cannot read [ISA 29.11-12] ... or that they refuse to understand the way God has given it.

Now, when we see such things – whether old or new manmade traditions that would undermine the pure teaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments according to Christ’s command not only in the Church but also in our **own** lives – let us not think **ourselves** so wise and discerning that we can never fall. For we **have** fallen – again and again. Indeed, it is just such haughtiness regarding what we consider **our** wisdom and **our** discernment. As the Scripture says: *Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall* [1COR 10.12]. For it is all too easy for **us** also to become set in our **own** manmade traditions – that are contrary to God’s Word and will.

Instead of becoming proud and haughty, let us rather be humbled. Our own grasp of true, enduring, Godly wisdom is not by our own reason or strength – but by the grace of God ... and by His gracious work in our lives **alone**. It is precisely when we are proud and haughty – boastful that we are better than those over there – that we let down our guard and allow to creep into our lives worldly thinking ... and manmade traditions contrary to God’s Word. It is precisely when we are proud and haughty – boastful that we are better than those over there – that we find ourselves under the same condemnation of the Lord through the prophet Isaiah reiterated by our Savior: *This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship Me* [MK 7.6-7]. When we come before the Lord proud that we are not like other sinners – like in Jesus’ parable of the

Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the temple [LK 18.10-14] – our worship is in vain ... empty ... useless; for our heart has closed itself to hearing and understanding God’s Word of Law that would humble us, condemn our sins, and direct us to repentance ... and it is too proud to hear and understand God’s Word of Gospel that gives us true wisdom, understanding, and discernment ... declaring that all of our good ... all of our holiness ... all of our righteousness comes from **outside** of us ... from Christ alone.

But behold, dear Christians, what Good Word God has given you this day ... what wonderful things He does with you again today in this place. He draws your heart back to Himself with the promises of His love. In love the LORD has opened your deaf ears so that you hear the Words of His Book – bringing you out of the gloom and darkness of your sin into the marvelous light of His forgiveness and eternal salvation ... which your eyes shall see fully when He has brought you into heaven [ISA 29.18]. In love He gives you fresh joy in the declaration that your sins are forgiven for Jesus’ sake – so that you exult in the Holy One of Israel [ISA 29.19].

And how could it not be so?! For your Lord Christ has loved you perfectly as a divine, heavenly Husband. Christ has given Himself up for you – literally, ***handed Himself over on your behalf***. Now **there’s** real tradition ... divine, enduring tradition – that’s where the word *tradition* comes from ... this handing over, handing down ... not all that is called *tradition* is wrong or bad. Christ *traditioned* Himself for you – gave Himself up for you – that He might make you holy in His sight. He has cleansed you – cleansed your inborn, sinful heart and soul – ***by the washing of water with the Word*** in the purifying flood of your Holy Baptism. With what purpose? ***That He might present*** you – and the whole Church – to ***Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing ... that you might be holy and without blemish*** before Him now and eternally. And **both** your Lord’s enduring love for you **and** your enduring presence with Him in heaven are assured. ***For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the Church, because we are members of His body.*** [EPH 5:25-30] As the first stanza of a blessed *Ascension* hymn puts it:

*On Christ’s Ascension I now build / The hope of my ascension;
This hope alone has always stilled / All doubt and apprehension;
For where the Head is, there as well
I know His members are to dwell
When Christ will come and call them.* [LSB 492]

And in just a very few minutes, your Lord Jesus Christ will *tradition* Himself –

hand Himself over – to you in the Sacrament of the Altar. As St. Paul puts it in 1CORINTHIANS: *For I received from the Lord what I also delivered – traditioned – to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed – traditioned – took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, “take, eat; this is My Body”* [11.23-24].

In the Name of the FATHER and of the + SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT. [Amen]