

PROPER SEVENTEEN, PENTECOST FIFTEEN, YEAR B, SEPTEMBER 1, 2024

Writer Debie Thomas and lay minister grew up in a church in India where jewelry was not allowed. Not even wedding bands or engagements rings could be worn. Women and girls weren't permitted to wear rings, necklaces, bracelets, or earrings. Even plastic play jewelry was banned. Anyone who showed up on a Sunday morning wearing jewelry could be denied Communion.

Growing up, she said she had no idea why God hated jewelry but was told that her bare ears and unadorned wrists were visible signs of her wholehearted devotion to Jesus. She was told that God's children didn't need outward adornment, because they were "clothed in righteousness" and avoiding material distractions and pleasures would help her grow as a Christian.

Even as a child she felt this was wrong and that the relationship between devotion and not wearing jewelry was far fetched. Because of this ban she was out of place with her non Christian friends who had pierced ears and wore bracelets and necklaces. Instead of this ban making her love God more she resented God. Why did Jesus want her to feel excluded, different, and weird at school? What was the point of parading her unadorned limbs in church every Sunday morning, if in her heart she was seething the whole time?

When she became an adult she learned the story of what prompted the ban on jewelry. Apparently, when her great-grandparents had been newlyweds, a large-scale charismatic revival had swept through South India, winning many converts from the ornate mainline churches. Many young adults embraced the simple faith the revivalists encouraged in those days and so, many of them chose to change their lifestyles for the sake of the Gospel. One of the lifestyle changes centered around jewelry. At that time gold meant social capital in India, when even Christian families judged each other's worth by the weight of the jewelry their women wore or how when girls whose fathers couldn't produce enough jewelry for their dowries had to remain unmarried. So, the decision to forsake jewelry in the name of Jesus was a radical one. It spoke powerfully to the equalizing power of the Gospel. Her great-grandparents and peers refused to participate in the snobbery of their time and place and instead would live counter-culturally and practice what Jesus preached — even if it meant losing their social standing and family honor. No matter what the cost, they would embrace humility, simplicity, and equality as testimonies of Christ's non-discriminating love.

It was a noble history but the problem was, its nobility had frozen in time. The context had changed, and so had the cultural and social meanings behind wearing a bracelet, a necklace, or a pair of earrings to church. Clearly, what had begun as an earnest and costly attempt to bring the sacred into everyday life had hardened over the generations into a Spirit-less legalism. What started out as a gesture of radical welcome and openness had become a tool of exclusion and self-righteousness. What grew from a holy desire to live as Christ lived had degenerated into an empty human tradition.

In this week's Gospel reading, Jesus confronts a group of Pharisees who accuse his disciples of disregarding "the tradition of the elders." The Pharisees had noticed that the disciples were not performing the ceremonial washings of their hands before they ate.

Now this action had nothing to do with hygiene it was strictly ceremonial with an elaborate procedure they believed would please God. Before the Pharisees would eat, they poured exactly 1 1/2 egg-shells of water over their hands with the fingers pointed upward. Then they poured exactly 1 1/2 egg-shells of water again over their hands from the wrists; this time holding their fingers downward. It was thought that in this fashion, they would purify their hands from any ceremonial uncleanness. Failure to wash ones hands in this way for them was to sin. Remember, this was merely a ceremonial washing, but it had become a very important tradition.

To our modern ears, the accusation the disciples were not washing their hands might sound ridiculous and trivial. But in fact, the Pharisees were asking a legitimate question. How can God's people show their faith among pagans? They determined by practicing the ancient rituals of their elders down to the last letter like washing their hands before every meal; refusing table fellowship with tax collectors, prostitutes, and other morally compromised sinners would set themselves apart in everyday life as God's righteous and holy people.

Now, obviously Jesus was not advocating eating with dirty hands. Rather he was condemning traditions that became more important than the things they represented. He saw that they were more concerned with outward things than they were with the things that really count.

What he challenges is their unwillingness to evolve, to mature, and to change for the sake of God's kingdom. What he grieves is the Pharisees' compulsive need to police the boundaries — to decide who is "in" and who is "out," based on their own narrow definitions of purity and piety. Jesus cut through the superficiality of their outward observances to stress that the inside was more important than the outside. Jesus was more concerned with their heart condition than their hand condition. Someone said that "the heart of Christianity is the heart."

Again, it's easy for us "moderns" to look down on the moral rigidity of the Pharisees, but honestly, are we really so different? Don't we sometimes behave as if there is nothing new to discover about the Holy Spirit's movements in the world? Don't we cling to traditions and practices that long ago ceased to be life-giving, simply because we can't bear to change "the way we've always done things?"

If we are not careful, some of these traditions take on a significance far greater than simply being a convenient routine. Some things become almost holy and unchangeable. When that happens they have moved from being a routine to becoming a sacred cow. Then, when someone tampers with a sacred cow, people become very upset. Every church has such traditions that have become sacred cows.

Unfortunately, sometimes those sacred cows can blind people to the point where some churches do not survive the conflict that a sacred cow can create. When certain practices or structure are elevated from the routine to sacred traditions there's a problem. Church growth specialist Bill Easum once wrote a book about this phenomenon. He called it "Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers." He says that churches that grow have to find a way to eat those sacred cows.

Jesus tells us that God is more concerned with who we are on the inside than the outward ceremonies we observe. You can wash your hands a thousand times and still not have God in your heart. How can we discern whether a tradition is life-giving or not? Jesus gives his listeners this advice: notice what comes *out* of you. Notice what

adherence to your tradition bears. Does your version of holiness lead to hospitality? To inclusion? To freedom? Does it cause your heart to open wide with compassion? Does it lead other people to feel loved and welcomed at God's table? Does it make you brave? Does it ready your mind and body for a God who is always doing something fresh and new? Does it facilitate another step forward in your spiritual evolution?

Retired Episcopal Bishop Steven Charleston and an elder in the Choctaw tribe said for Native Americans tradition is not about staying the same. It is not about continuing spiritual business as usual. Rather tradition is the path to the future because it is how we constantly renew what we have. Faith is about making all things new. *All* things—not just a few. It is about transforming life in the communal home by reimagining it and recreating it until life emerges, just as our past is reshaped to fit our future.

It's not the outward form of the tradition that matters; it's what lies in our hearts that counts. When the tradition becomes more important than proclaiming God's love, mercy and forgiveness than the tradition has failed. The real discipline of religion is not preserving our traditions but rather having big hearts. Let us embrace big hearts. Amen.