

Marjorie and I realized we had not been to the Farmer’s Market down on 11th Street between Howard and Jackson for the longest time this summer. Each Saturday morning has been filled with activities. Labor Day weekend found our schedule open so we enjoyed the Farmer’s Market. To cap off the holiday weekend we will walk over the 12th and Capitol streets to watch the Labor Day parade. If there has been a tradition for us on Labor Day weekend that has been it; enjoy the Farmers Market and then the parade. The parade with various union participants is a good reminder of the holiday’s origin.

In the late 1800s, at the height of the Industrial Revolution in the United States, the average American worked 12-hour days and seven-day weeks in order to eke out a basic living. Despite restrictions in some states, children as young as 5 or 6 toiled in mills, factories and mines across the country, earning a fraction of their adult counterparts’ wages.

People of all ages, particularly the very poor and recent immigrants, often faced extremely unsafe working conditions, with insufficient access to fresh air, sanitary facilities and breaks. As manufacturing increasingly supplanted agriculture as the wellspring of American employment, labor unions, which had first appeared in the late 18th century, grew more prominent and vocal. They began organizing strikes and rallies to protest poor conditions and compel employers to renegotiate hours and pay.

On September 5, 1882, 10,000 workers took unpaid time off to march from City Hall to Union Square in New York City, holding the first Labor Day parade in U.S. history. The idea of a “workingmen’s holiday,” celebrated on the first Monday in September, caught on in other industrial centers across the country, and many states passed legislation recognizing it. Congress would not legalize the holiday until 12 years later, when a watershed moment in American labor history brought workers’ rights squarely into the public’s view. On May 11, 1894, employees of the Pullman Palace Car Company in Chicago went on strike to protest wage cuts and the firing of union representatives.

On June 26, the American Railroad Union called for a boycott of all Pullman railway cars, crippling railroad traffic nationwide. To break the strike, the federal government dispatched troops to Chicago, unleashing a wave of riots that resulted in the deaths of more than a dozen workers.

In the wake of this massive unrest and in an attempt to repair ties with American workers, Congress passed an act making Labor Day a legal holiday. Labor leaders suggested the first Monday in September as an ideal date for such a public celebration, owing to optimum weather and the date’s place on the calendar, sitting midway between the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving public holidays.

Labor Day is still celebrated in cities and towns across the United States with parades, picnics, barbecues, and fireworks displays. What have your traditions been for Labor Day weekend over the years?

The idea of “tradition” is a theme that emerges in our gospel lesson today. In fact, we started this summer off with a sermon series that connected us with our Wesleyan tradition of “doing good” as followers of Christ. Remember that from May and June?

Do all the good you can.
By all the means you can.
In all the ways you can.
In all the places you can.
At all the times you can.
To all the people you can.
As long as ever you can.

Traditions ground us with our past. Labor Day weekend reminds us of the challenges of establishing healthy work environments for workers and the ongoing need to maintain healthy settings for workers as the workplace continues to change in dramatic fashions.

The “Doing Good” sermon series reminded us of our rich history as United Methodist dating back to the mid-1700’s England. Doing Good is an ethic we can take pride in and continue to live out in our own unique way here at St. Paul in the 21st century. Yet, in our gospel lesson “tradition” is placed in a negative light as Jesus’ adversaries seemingly lift up some traditions that are healthy but as they do so they seem to be missing the true meaning of what is happening in their midst.

As Chapter 7 of Mark opens up we read:

“Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ² they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. . . . ⁵ So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”

That seems like a straight forward question and most of us agree with the tradition of good hygiene, in this case, “wash your hands before you eat.”

Therefore Jesus response to the Pharisees and the scribes seem quite odd on first blush as he says:

“Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,
‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
⁷ in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

⁸ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

To understand the befuddlement of Jesus to what he hears from the Pharisee and scribes as well as his judgmental response to their comment about the disciples’ dirty hands I think we need to look at the previous chapter. What happens in chapter 6 in the gospel of Mark?

1. In the first six verses Jesus is rejected when he returns home for the first time since he started his public ministry. He was “amazed” at the unbelief he found in his hometown. Just like the Pharisees and scribes those in his hometown did not catch on to what he was doing.
2. In verses 7-13 he sends his twelve disciples out in pairs with instructions to visit towns and cast out unclean spirits. It was seemingly a great success as verse 13 reads that “They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.”
3. Now all of this is happening up in Galilee which is about 90 miles north of Jerusalem but verses 14-29 indicate that King Herod heard of all that Jesus was doing and it highly disturbed him because he thought Jesus was John, whom he beheaded, raised from the dead. Maybe this explains why the Pharisees and scribes who are based out of the Temple in Jerusalem are found up in Galilee, totally out of place for them. Maybe Herod sent them there.
4. In verses 30-44 of chapter 6 throngs of people follow Jesus out in the wilderness as he is trying to find some alone time with the disciples. In the midst of this he teaches the crowds. Yet as the day ends they are out in the wilderness and it is time to eat with little food at hand and no towns nearby. What follows is the miracle of feeding the 5,000 men along with the women and children who gathered and having food left over.
5. In verses 45-52 Jesus walks on the water in the midst of a storm.
6. Then the final verses of chapter 6, 53-56, which directly precede the complaint about the disciples lack of hand washing before eating. Please hear those verses, “⁵³ When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. ⁵⁴ When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, ⁵⁵ and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶ And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.”

Demons are being cast out, the multitudes are being fed, the sick are healed and what do the Pharisees and scribes focus on; hand washing! Instead of celebrating how God is powerfully working through Jesus and his disciples the Pharisees and scribes seemingly have an agenda to find fault with Jesus and his activities. He will have none of it.

Hygiene is a good attribute but oftentimes ministry is down and dirty. Putting one's hand on the forehead of demon possessed person who has been wandering the streets for years can be messy. Yet when the demons left that man or that woman God's presence was celebrated. There were no wash basins available in the wilderness when the multitudes were feed with five fish and two loaves yet God's presence was felt as stomachs were filled. The sick carried to Jesus had every sort of germ, bug and ailment yet Jesus embraced and healed them. Traditions are oftentimes healthy but we are never to let traditions blind us from the true meaning of what God is doing in our midst.

I think that is what is happening in the midst of our denomination today. Tradition blinds some from seeing the true meaning of what is happening in our midst. There is a tradition of lifting up select scripture passages to disenfranchise lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgendered and queer persons in the United Methodist Church. Tradition can blind some from seeing the talents of LGBTQ persons who have the sacred call of God to the ordained or licensed ministry. Tradition can blind some from seeing the love, care and commitment between two lesbian or two gay persons who want to marry and raise a family just like their heterosexual counterparts. Traditions like a Labor Day parade, the "Doing Good" ethic of United Methodists and even washing our hands before we eat are good. Yet, we like the Pharisees and scribes are never to let traditions blind us from the true meaning of what God is doing in our midst.