

A True Heart by Holly Aastuen  
August 30, 2009 Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

The first time I saw *Fiddler on the Roof*, I was in Junior High and my friend Kathy Larson was in the play at Minnetonka High School. I loved the songs and the story and the intriguing character of Tevye. He was such a likeable fellow, doing his best to control his wife and 5 daughters, doing his best to hold it all together. Tradition was very important to him in his role of the father, the head of the household, the boss of this Jewish family living in Russia in the early 1900s.

The play was all about tradition and the tradition most frequently challenged during the play was the tradition of choosing his future sons-in-law. As the head of the household it was his prerogative to choose, with the help of the matchmaker, suitable life companions for his daughters.

As a poor farmer, he wanted to make the right decisions and find good, wealthy matches for his daughters, but each time he tried to do so, his daughters found someone they love and for some odd reason they would rather marry for love than follow the tradition. But tradition was something that Tevye clung to even in the midst of changing times.

Another group of tradition-loving people was the Pharisees, with whom Jesus was always butting heads. In the case of this story, the Pharisees were criticizing the disciples who were breaking what was customary, or traditional, in their rituals of cleanliness. The Pharisees were shocked and indignant about the way that Jesus and his disciples had parted from the traditional cleansing processes before eating. Jesus responded by saying that those who challenged him were majoring in minors, that is, they were concerned about petty things when they should have been more concerned about important things like the condition of their souls.

Their motives may have been good. They wanted to do what was right in the eyes of God. They wanted their lives to be guided by God and the best way they knew how to do that was by following tradition and the laws established by God. They found Jesus' ways not only strange, but offensive because they didn't see him fitting in with what faithful living had meant up to this point. They couldn't change their vision of faithful life to include what he was now teaching.

They knew their traditions. And by sticking to their traditions they had lived faithful lives. Nothing Jesus could say would sway them from their clinging to tradition.

A young, newly ordained minister went to serve his first church. He noticed that on the first Sunday, when he said the prayers, the congregation on the left side of the church stood at the beginning of the prayers, and the congregation on the right side remained seated. The young minister thought this was a bit odd, but he kept going in the prayers—until he heard some murmuring between the two sides, then the murmuring grew into grumbling which grew into people yelling at

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each other across the aisles: “Why don’t you stand? He’s saying the prayers!” said the left to the right.

“Why don’t you sit down and show some respect? He’s saying the prayers!” said the right to the left.

The young minister didn’t know what to do, so the next day he went to talk to one of the previous pastors who now was quite elderly, but several years ago had served the congregation as their pastor.

He asked the older gentleman. “So is it the tradition of the congregation to stand during the prayers?”

The older minister, whose memory was now failing, stroked his beard and replied, “No, that is not the tradition as I recall.”

“So is the tradition that they sit during the prayers?” To which the old minister responded, “No, that’s not the tradition either.”

The young pastor threw up his hands in despair and said, “There must be some solution to this! The way things are now, half stand and half sit and by the end of the prayers the two sides are screaming at each other to change their ways.”

The old pastor’s face lit up in a smile, as he lifted his finger high in the air and said, “Ah, yes! Now I remember—that was the tradition!”

Now that story may seem ridiculous, but there are traditions in every religion that to the outsider seem strange. The traditions may have reinforced something important when they were first established, but now no one can remember what that important thing was and why it was so good. Only those traditions that reinforce something very basic and essential to the congregation are traditions worth keeping.

Tradition, at its best, tells us something of who God is and who we are. Tradition, at its best, gets at the heart of who we truly are and who God truly is.

Sometimes traditions need to die, especially if they are causing others to question the value of a religion that puts more effort into keeping those traditions than in keeping people in the love of God. Sometimes people miss the whole point of religion, which is to worship and love God with all your heart, soul and mind and your neighbor as yourself. Ritual without heart is not a worth following.

This gets back to something I was talking about a couple of weeks ago, which is the difference between a mission driven and a preference driven church. A mission driven church knows what it is about and works with one accord toward

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that mission. A preference driven church battles about red carpet versus blue carpet or whether one should stand or sit during the prayers.

What is our mission? What drives us as a church? Is our mission to radiate Christ's love in the community as it says on the top of every bulletin? Does that mission still hold our hearts and guide our actions?

Ultimately when we stand before Christ, we will not be judged by whether we washed or did not wash our hands in a ritualized manner before a meal, or by the number of Bible verses we have memorized or even by the number of times we were in prayer. These are all good and right things to do and they will bring us into closer connection with God, but what we will be judged by ultimately is by the number of people whom we have helped, the number of people we have shown the love of God.

The reality is that we all sometimes go off track and forget why we are here. We forget our mission and get mired in our personal preferences. We forget why God has put us together to worship and to serve.

Traditions, as a whole are good. As a United Methodist congregation we are encouraged to make decisions based on the Wesleyan quadrilateral, based on scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Tradition is an important part of who we are and what we do.

But tradition, when it gets in the way of love is no longer healthy.

Remember Tevye, that bumbling yet loveable character in Fiddler on the Roof? When his first daughter asked to marry the poor tailor rather than the rich older man with whom she had been matched, he went along with it and made up a story to tell his wife and the marriage went through. When the second daughter asked to marry a poor student she had fallen in love with, Tevye again made up a story about a rich uncle and eventually, though very reluctantly, let her marry Perchik, once again bending the rules to let the two be married.

But when the third daughter asked to marry a soldier from the occupying forces, Tevye decided that if he bent that far he would break. If he bent the rules to allow his daughter to marry a Gentile, that would be an unforgivable sin. He refused to bless their marriage; he kicked her out of their house and said she was dead to him. Her name was never to be mentioned again in his home and the daughter he loved so dearly was cut off from the father she loved.

As the play ends this third daughter comes back to her father one last time to say good-bye before her family leaves for America. The role of the third daughter, by the way, was played by my friend Kathy Larson back so many years ago. Tevye's whole family is being uprooted by the Russian Revolution and as they pack their cart, Chava, the third daughter, appears. She makes one final attempt

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to make contact with her father. She hopes for his blessing. She prays to be at peace with this father she so deeply loves.

But Tevye clung to his tradition. Though he said a quiet blessing under his breath, he still turned his back on his daughter, to him she was still dead.

Fiddler on the Roof—what a great show. It has great music and a compelling story line and in it is a man named Tevye, the man who dearly loved his traditions...so much so that it broke his heart.