Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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RULES AND REGULATIONS Mark 7:1–15, 21–23

This morning’s gospel reading from Mark is both interesting and challenging. It is all about the way the rules and regulations of religion can get in the way of the good news of the gospel. This sort of thing not only took place in Jesus’ day but can and does take place in every time and place, including our own.

There are, it seems, unwritten rules that seem to govern our life together. Here are some suggested by the Lectionary Study Group:

Always sit at the back of the church.

Do not sing too loudly.

Hesitate to share a joy or a concern.

Do not stand out in any way.

Do not do or say anything that might

not be acceptable to your family.

We must continue to do the things the same

way we have always done them.

Some rules and regulations have more serious consequences. Recently, I have begun to reflect more and more on how we use the rules and regulations of Robert’s Rules of Order in our own church life. As in most churches, it is the practice in our church to put things up to a vote. In the case of most issues, especially minor issues such as purchasing this or that, or repairing something, the votes are unanimous. But in crucial issues, the votes are sometimes divided: 5 to 4, or 6 to 3, and so on. As a result of these votes, a good portion of those voting leave the meeting feeling that they have lost. This creates dissension in the church, and sometimes division and even splits among the members. In such instances, rules and regulations have gotten in the way of unity within the church. And when we are disunited, we are less apt to come together around the spirit and call of the gospel.

So we must always be on guard against allowing rules and regulations to get in the way of gospel. Jesus in his own day confronted the rules and regulations of his religious culture. In our passage today from the Gospel of Mark, the Pharisees and scribes accuse Jesus and his disciples of not following the rules governing religious purity commonly accepted in the Jewish community. (We must always remember Jesus and his disciples were Jews, something Christians tend to forget.) It seems that Jesus and the disciples had been eating with Gentiles, and possibly outcast Jews and “sinners” of one kind or another. We do know that Jesus invited all kinds of people to share the food of his table, many of them disreputable. Probably, such open table fellowship led Jesus and his disciples to abandon the rituals of religious purity, such as ceremonially washing one’s hands or cooking utensils before eating. After all, Gentiles, outcasts, and sinners were not in the least concerned about these kinds of rules. If rules of purity were to be followed, it would prevent Gentiles, outcasts, and sinners from eating with Jesus. And that would be against the good news Jesus taught and lived, that God’s realm was open to all people.

The Pharisees and scribes accuse Jesus of not following the tradition of the elders, and not only the ceremonial washing of hands before eating, but also other rules and regulations governing religious purity. Jesus is quick to respond. He first quotes words spoken by the prophet Isaiah:

“This people honors me with their lips,

but their hearts are far from me;

in vain do they worship me,

teaching human precepts as doctrines. —Mk 7:6–7

Jesus then makes a distinction between rules/regulations and commandments. In the example he provides, the commandment to honor one’s parents is contrasted with a rule set up by human tradition that if one promises a monetary gift (called a corban) to the temple, it must be given even if mom and dad fall into dire circumstances and need to be helped. In such a case, the rule governing gifts to the temple trumps the commandment to honor one’s mother and father, and that is simply unjust.

Jesus concludes his argument by saying that religious rules and regulations have nothing to do with the human heart. They are merely external signs of religious piety. What really counts, says Jesus, is what is inside us, deep within our hearts. It is from our hearts that righteous action comes. Walking the path of righteousness has nothing to do with the keeping of religious rules.

And so we reflect upon our own Christian life and ask ourselves: are there rules and regulations we follow that get in the way of our living the truth and spirit of the gospel as taught and lived by Jesus? Do we set up barriers and boundaries that prevent others from becoming part of us? Do we say that others must become like us before they can join our company? These are important questions for any Christian community to ask. I would not presume to say which rules and regulations practiced by our church prevent us from living out the gospel in our life together. That is for all of us together to discern. At the same time, I would also say that there is not a Christian congregation that exists that does not have these kinds of rules and regulations that get in the way of gospel. We are not excluded. Any rule, any regulation that gets in the way of loving God and neighbor is not worth keeping.

Usually, when some in a church say that “this is the way we have always done it,” or “this is our tradition and it cannot be changed,” I think it is right to get just a little suspicious. It’s not that all tradition is harmful. It is not. But there are probably traditional practices and ways that should be re-considered. Think about what might happen, for example, if we were to replace Roberts Rules of Order with a consensus style of decision making, That is, we would not decide to do anything as a church until everyone was in agreement. It might take a while to get things done, but our unity as a people would be preserved, and there is surely great value in that.

There is another problem with rules and regulations when they get in the way of gospel. They also get in the way of the Spirit’s work, which is the work of change and transformation, and they also turn us into humorless people. It may seem trite for me to say this, but when we Christians do not have a sense of humor or the capacity to laugh at our silly behavior and ourselves, then we have allowed rules and regulations to defeat the work of the Spirit, which ever seeks to change and transform us.

I close with an illustration from one of my favorite movies of all time, “Babette’s Feast.” To make a long story short, Babette, who once lived in Paris, comes to a little dreary coastal village in Denmark. The villagers belong to a very strict Christian sect, which is controlled by lots of religious rules and regulations, so much so that they have become humorless and dispirited human beings. There is no life, no joy, no spirit, no generosity, no open-heartedness in them. They walk around with permanent frowns on their faces.

Babette, who has come to the village to be the housekeeper of two elderly sisters, the daughters of the sect’s late founder, begins to bring a measure of lightness to the village. It so happens that Babette wins 10,000 francs in the French lottery, and she decides to use the money to put on an exquisite feast of French foods and wines for the villagers when they celebrate the birthday of their founder. The villagers reluctantly arrive at the feast with downcast faces. They sense that such a feast should be forbidden, given their commitment to the strict rules and regulations of their religious life, but since it is a meal to honor their founder, they are compelled to come. Gradually, as they let go of their religious rules and begin to enjoy the food and the wine and each other, they begin to laugh and talk and the joy of simply being together overtakes them. That is how the movie ends.

So, my brothers and sisters, if there are rules and regulations that prevent us from being the joyful, spirited people God wants us to be, let us be ready to set them aside and allow the Spirit of God to work through us and change and transform our life together. So will we be the faithful followers of Jesus, who in his ministry and mission was always ready to challenge the human rules and regulations of his religious heritage. So will we be the spirited and joyful people God created us to be. Amen.