Nu'uanu Congregational Church

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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

It’s a joy to be with you this day and may God’s grace and peace dwell among us. Let us pray: May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

This morning’s gospel reading from Mark is both interesting and challenging. It is all about the ways 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’s day but can and does take place in every time and place, including our own.

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 by the Jewish community. (We must always remember that 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, and not just some. Probably, such open table fellowship led Jesus and his disciples to abandon the rituals of religious purity, such as ceremonially washing one’s hands 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 these sorts of folk 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.”*

* Mark 7:6–7

Jesus then makes a distinction between religious 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 upon one’s death, it can never be changed 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 arises. Walking the path of righteousness has nothing to do with the keeping of religious rules.

And so now 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 himself? 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 that can fully 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 Nu'uanu Congregational 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 there is not a Christian community that exists that does not have these kinds of rules that get in the way of the gospel. We are not excluded.

I recall the wisdom of my own father, a Baptist preacher, when, in his later years, said that he was tired of going to church and having to listen to yet one more “how to be good” sermon. He added that these sermons usually came down to three things one must do in order to be a Christian, namely, 1) go to church on Sunday; 2) give money to the church; and 3) be polite. These were all counted as religious rules and regulations, although the word “polite” is not a word to be found in the entire Bible! And these rules and regulations are all outward behaviors that may have nothing to do with what is going on inside, deep within the human heart. Please do not misunderstand. I am not saying that we should not attend worship or financially support the church or be civil and polite, one with another. I am saying that the Christian faith demands much more than these practices.

I think that these three rules— going to church, giving money to the church, and being polite— defined church life in the 1950’s during the heyday of American Protestantism. And let’s admit that they are still with us. In fact, we are nostalgic for those days when churches were full on Sunday and when Sunday Schools were bustling with children. But those days are over. The danger is that we will do everything we can to attract people to come to church, including dumbing down the gospel, hoping against hope that we can return to those “good old days,” which in truth probably were not really that great.

What will really count as we face the church’s future is not how many people we can persuade to come through our doors but what is inside the human hearts of those who come together in the spirit of Christ. We are going to have to pay far greater attention to the need of the Christian faith to be rooted and grounded in the human heart, rather than the desire to achieve any outward signs of success. For Christians, perhaps it comes down to the two great commandments Jesus taught us to keep. “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this. ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:29-31) Any rule, any regulation that gets in the way of loving God and neighbor is not worth keeping.

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 10,0000 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 sect’s 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 feel compelled to come. Gradually, at the feast, 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.

Babette’s feast reminds me of the table fellowship Jesus shared with his friends. It was a joyful and spirited fellowship. And so, my brothers and sisters, if there are rules and regulations that prevent us from being the joyful, spirited, loving people God wants us to be, let us be ready to set them aside, and focus on the deepest needs and longings of our hearts, allowing the Spirit of God and the love of Christ to work through us and change and transform our life together. So will we be the faithful people God created us to be. Amen.