**Text: Isaiah 29:11-19, Mark 7:1-13**

The Traditions of Man

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. Tradition. What a wonderful word that is. I’m certain that with just a few moments of thought you could name at least a dozen traditions that you’ve either heard of or participated in yourself. Traditions are interesting and sometimes puzzling. For instance, it is a tradition in Pennsylvania, that every year on February 2nd, we celebrate Groundhog Day. Perhaps this is a “holiday” that you have heard of. Basically, a bunch of people get up really early in the morning, early enough to go hunting, and they stand in the cold around a tree stump in a park before sunrise. Then a committee shows up, called the Inner Circle of the Punxsutawney Groundhog Club, dressed in top hats and tuxedos, in order to coax Punxsutawney Phil out of his hole. And what will happen is that the leader of the club and Phil will have a brief conversation at dawn, and Phil will tell the man whether or not he saw his shadow. If he saw his shadow, booo, that meant six more weeks of winter. I just want to say that I always found it odd that February 2nd is six weeks from the beginning of spring. But if Phil emerged from his stump and did not see his shadow, then alas! Spring was right around the corner! Even though it was actually six weeks away. I just want to note that in my 27 years he has only predicted an early spring 7 times, he accurately predicted a long winter for us last year. But this brief little exercise in silliness is a tradition. Why else would someone put a groundhog close to their face in order to ask it if it saw its shadow. You certainly wouldn’t ask one that question if you saw one on the side of the road. There are other examples of traditions that we can all appreciate. The aspects of the various monarchies around the world are great examples of tradition. Even us in the United States have a great deal of tradition. Have you ever watched a state funeral? Visited the tomb of the unknown soldier? Participated in a military funeral? We have a great number of examples of state traditions that we participate in on a regular basis. These traditions, in my experience, have always aroused a great appreciation and patriotism within me. They always make me proud of my American heritage. I have felt the same way when I have visited battlefields such as Vicksburg and Gettysburg. There are these sorts of things that bring us pride in our country, and then there are other traditions that bring forth pride in other things. I know that there are college football fans in the congregation so I’m certain that by now we get the point. Tradition is something that we love. It is something that brings us together. It is something that binds us with one another.

Tradition and worship are another thing that go hand in hand. One of the greatest issues of the Reformation was the fact that the romanists had taken the catholic church, and made it more about following the tradition than following the word of God. We too, in the Lutheran church, have been guilty of doing this to some extent, in fact every group has at some point or another. And in our Gospel lesson, we are shown that this friction between the traditions of worship and the word of God is a problem that has endured for a long time. You see in our Gospel lesson Jesus and his disciples come under fire, as they often do. However, this time it isn’t for saying something radical like Jesus said last week, you know about eating his flesh, drinking his blood, and being raised from the dead. No, this time Jesus and his disciples get in trouble with the hall monitor. The Gospel lesson says, “**Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed…And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, ‘Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?’**” Now in the middle there is the explanation of a tradition of handwashing, along with the mention that there are several other traditions that the Jews upheld. Now Jesus and his disciples have come under fire for not washing their hands. Now today that’s no big deal. Research shows actually that 95 percent of people do not wash their hands long enough to kill bacteria. Apparently only 66 percent of people use soap and 10 percent skip out on washing their hands all together. But in this context, this was a tiny little violation (remember the time period in which these people lived) that the Pharisees can nail him on and say, “See you aren’t as holy as you say! You can’t be the Son of God, you can’t even keep the traditions of the temple!” Now this is what one might call nit-picking and what’s more is that Jesus knows it. For Jesus knows what great hypocrites they are and he always confronts them. In fact the best part is that he always uses scripture in order to confront them. He tells them that the prophet Isaiah, one of the best known prophets, spoke about them! Our text from Isaiah this morning states, “**Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men, therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.**” Isaiah is speaking of this very time in which Jesus is confronting the Pharisees. For Jesus tells them that, “**You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.**” Jesus knows that it is all about vanity with these people when it comes to their traditions. In some cases, our traditions become instances of vanity as well. In fact, they all are examples of vanity because our traditions instill a personal pride within us. Now I’m not saying that traditions are bad all the time, but sometimes they get in the way. When it comes to life in the church, Jesus is using Isaiah to tell us that while we may worship God with our lips, we need to be sure to worship him with our hearts. That means when it comes to worshiping God we need to be all in. We can’t just be giving God lip service.

But how is it that we are to worship God with all our hearts? Well you see this is the hard part. This is the most difficult aspect to the whole thing. It means we have to live as Christians outside of our church walls. We cannot be ashamed to state and show who we are and stand up for Christian values. When it comes to the great commandment that Jesus gave, you know the famous golden rule, did you know that he gave a commandment before that? Again, when questioned by the Pharisees, Jesus gives a wonderful answer. The narrative goes like this, “**But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?’ And he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.’**” Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Undying devotion. That is the first and greatest commandment. Undying devotion to God, not to the traditions of man, not to our own exercises in vanity. And the thing of it is that none of the tradition in the world can mask the intentions of our hearts. God knows which of us come before his altar truly worthy, truly humbled, and truly repentant. Yet God bids us all to change our hearts, to change our ways, and to worship him outside of this building by coming to true repentance. Because God is always willing to offer his gift of forgiveness to you. Christ died specifically so that you could receive that gift. You were baptized so that you could receive that gift. The gift of forgiveness that comes to us freely in the body and blood of Christ here at this altar. The gift of forgiveness we receive here every Sunday, and also which I believe we receive when we truly ask for it with a repentant heart outside of church. But we need to have faith in the gifts of God and who they come from. We can’t just give it lip service, we need to do it whole heartedly. The good news is that God’s gifts account for the times we can’t. God does this because he loves us so. God does this because he sent his Son to die for us. Believe in these gifts. Tell people about these gifts in the store, at the gas station, in McDonalds that is the way to start. It is a mission we have to start because it is our job as the church, as the congregation of believers, to bring the Gospel to all of God’s people. This is our charge, to share the eternal inheritance of God with everyone. That is how we serve God before our traditions. By putting his mission of spreading the Gospel first and foremost in our lives. Now don’t worry the traditions we have aren’t going anywhere. They carry an important aspect as to how we conduct ourselves here. But they cannot be the center of our thoughts. The Word of God must prevail, now and forever. Amen. Now may the peace of God which surpasses our understanding guide and keep your heart in Christ Jesus now and forever. Amen.