

Winds of Change

“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?’ He said to them, ‘Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honor me with their lips. But their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrine.’ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

This coming Sunday we will be confronted with one of those hot button issues that constantly get religious institutions tangled up and confused. What do we do when the practices, identities and rituals of our religious institution become an end to themselves? How do we grapple with the fact that we need to learn to let go of ways of being that we feel shape our very identity? How do we encounter the proposition that the things which we hold tightly no longer serve God’s purposes? Sunday, in Mark’s Gospel, the Pharisees and the scribes, those who represent the religious establishment, confront Jesus and they want to know why Jesus’ disciples do not follow the tradition of the elders. We always like to pick on the Pharisees but we do so at great risk. If we fail to see ourselves in their behavior, we trivialize Jesus’ whole teaching around very important questions. The Pharisees were devout men. Starting with the best of intentions, they attempted to apply the Law of Moses to every aspect of life, and most of all, they were scrupulous about honoring the food which they received from God. The trouble, however, is that eventually the strict practices they developed became an end in themselves. But Jesus is leading people into a new way of having a relationship with God; instead of subscribing to this current system of unbendable rules and practices, Jesus is teaching unflinching examination of the status quo. Jesus is urging people to leave empty practices behind and to step out into the liberating truth that God’s deepest joy is in how we treat one another, not in how we perpetuate the rituals of the religious institution. But, in a world that often changes far too fast, we find comfort in the seeming unchangeableness of religion as we know it so this is still a hard teaching. To fully trust God, we must be prepared to move and change; faith asks us to keep our hearts and minds open for the renewal and re-creation of our lives and worship. God is always creating and re-creating and we forget that sometimes we must let some things die or crumble so that God’s newness can come in. We are often challenged because we want life to be organized and we want life to be understandable. We want faith to be simple and constant. We want God to be predictable and protective of that which is most familiar. We do not like interruptions in our habitual patterns. It can be hard to trust that the Holy Spirit is the force behind the falling of comforting and constant things in the church and in our lives, that maybe God is urging these things. When confronted by such a time, perhaps we should go into a season of discernment, “What is God trying to say to me, to us, are we being ask to move and grow? The whole message of Jesus invites us to constantly push against our love of the predictable; he shows us the sometimes difficult and changeable path we too must follow to keep our religion and faith from becoming empty and stale. And it’s not about just accepting everything new that comes along, but his words are a warning against being so tied to “old ways” that we miss God’s invitation to be re-created and more authentic and whole in our quest to be the “Church”. Can we trust that God is able and ready to help us re-create, re-vision, and welcome something new, keeping the best of the old while we leave the rest behind. And more importantly, can we trust one another and the Holy Spirit to help us know what to keep and what to throw away? These are challenging but important questions, our greatest hope is to be fearless in love and action, compassionate and forgiving in word and deed and vowing never to abandon the commandment of God to hold to a human tradition. God always leaves the decision to us. May we choose fearlessly and wisely!

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+