

We've Always Done it This Way

Mark 7:1-23

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

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Two weeks ago, I preached in the “trading center” of Ntaja, in the country of Malawi, Central Africa. Maybe you were here at the beginning of worship, when we showed a few photos of our trip to visit our sister congregation; some of you have been there; most of you have heard something about our partnership with the Mbenjere church.

I need to tell you, it is HOT in Ntaja right now. Intellectually, I think you know that it is summer in Malawi when it is winter here. But for some reason, Ntaja is particularly hot. I mean, even when we met Malawians who'd asked us where we'd been to visit, they said, “Ntaja? Really? Hooo, it's hot there.” No kidding. One afternoon I felt Tim patting me on the back. I assumed I just deserved it, and he said, “Dave, you've got some chalk on your shirt.” Nope. That was salt from the sweat that had seeped through. Do you get the picture? It was hot.

As hot as it was in church on Sunday, it was even hotter on Monday, when we went with the elders and the pastor to a village nearby where I was to preach a funeral service. At about 2 in the afternoon. Outside. Wearing not only my long-sleeved black shirt with the clerical collar, but my preaching gown. The other pastor was wearing a business suitcoat, a black preaching gown, and a woolen cassock – a sort of an “undergarment” for the preaching gown. I apologized for not wearing one, saying I'd forgotten it in Pittsburgh. And it occurred to me, “What are we doing here? Why are we wearing these outfits at this time and place?”

Well, it starts on Christmas Day in 1521. A German pastor was frustrated by the ways that many of his colleagues spent so much time and energy designing their clerical vestments. Priests would wear incredible hats, shoes, robes, surplices, and more – and this pastor thought that it was just too showy in a religion that was based on following the teachings of a middle-eastern peasant. So on December 25, 1521, that pastor decided that he would show up for worship in his “regular” clothes – the long black robe that he wore to his “day job” as a university professor.

Well, other pastors began following his lead, and about 20 years later, when John Calvin was leading the Presbyterians in Geneva, Switzerland, he said that all pastors should wear the long black robes when they preach. And it made sense. Pastors already had the robes. In that Northern European climate, having long sleeves and a full wrap just made sense – especially when you consider that most of the buildings were probably not heated. And now, the black robe that I own (but rarely wear) is called a “Geneva Gown” – named for the city of Calvin's ministry.

One of the visitors to Geneva during Calvin's time was a Scotsman by the

name of John Knox. While there, he called Geneva “the most perfect school of Christ.” In 1560, the Scottish Parliament established the Presbyterian Church in Scotland, and they tapped Knox to head it. He modeled that church after what he’d seen in Geneva, and so you can guess what the preachers wore: long black robes.

Two hundred and twenty six years later, Henry Henderson led a group of four Scottish missionaries to Malawi. They camped under a tree in Blantyre, and got to work teaching their new neighbors the Christian faith. They emphasized the grace and forgiveness that comes in Jesus. They taught morality and stewardship of God’s gifts. They worshiped, and when they did, they sang from the Scottish hymnal and wore Geneva gowns.

Which explains, at least in part, why 134 years after Henry Henderson showed up in Blantyre, we were wearing medieval European garments to an African funeral. Don’t get me wrong: I was honored to be there, and happy to preach. And the funeral service was not the time to ask why we’re putting on long black outfits when it’s a hundred and ten degrees out.

But do you think...I mean, really...would it still have been a Christian funeral if we wore, say, polo shirts and short pants? What makes it a service of Christian worship? The attire of the person presiding? Or the intentions of the attendees? The tune to the songs that we sang? Or our attentiveness to God’s word for and working in our lives?

Mark chapter seven introduces a shift in Jesus’ ministry. It’s a subtle shift, but it’s significant nevertheless. In the first six chapters, we’ve seen Jesus as a miracle worker who seemed to do his best stuff with a big crowd around. He is in Galilee, and Mark has told us story after story of Jesus healing and exorcising and teaching the crowds in the villages and towns. But we see a new emphasis developing, and we’ll be talking about it for a few weeks: Jesus is now getting away from the crowds and spending time intentionally building his inner core of disciples. He is directing his teaching towards them, forming them for the ministries that they will embrace in the years to come.

Mark begins this section on spiritual formation with a description of a conflict with some religious leaders. These gentlemen observe Jesus and his followers and they are appalled that the group takes a break for lunch and just dives right in – without going through the elaborate ritual washing ceremonies that most Jews observed.

I need to point out that this was not a concern about personal hygiene. The Pharisees and Scribes weren’t concerned that Jesus and his friends were going to catch a disease because their hands were especially dirty. They were upset because this was a breach of protocol. Jesus and his followers were not observing the traditions that had been handed down, and the religious people took this as a sign of disrespect for the traditions and practices that they’d dedicated their lives to preserving.

As you heard in the reading, Jesus pushes right back on them: how can

they be so upset with him for disregarding the tradition when they themselves have been ignoring the word of God? Jesus uses this confrontation to teach his followers a powerful lesson: they are not free to treat the word of God lightly.

There are many occasions in Mark's gospel where Jesus follows traditions that he's been taught: the ways that he blesses the food at meals, for instance, or the wearing of a prayer shawl. But here he makes it clear that any tradition is only valid as long as it points to the life-changing truth that comes from God's word. In fact, in another place, Jesus warns his followers not to take the traditions of the religious teachers lightly, saying that his disciples must be even more righteous than the Pharisees. But the core message in this passage seems to be Jesus' insistence that none of his disciples – including us – are free to treat the traditions and commandments of other humans as more important than those that come from God.

There's one other detail about this passage that I think bears special notice. We remember that Jesus took issue with the Pharisees. OK, we've seen that before. But look back at verse one and get an indication of which Pharisees and teachers of the Law have brought this complaint against Jesus. It says that this was a delegation of leaders from Jerusalem. Jesus and his followers are in Galilee – about seventy miles from Jerusalem. Jerusalem is where the Jewish religious establishment was based, while Galilee was back-woods region. Yet Jesus and his miracles and his teachings have attracted the attention of the fellows in the “home office”, and they've sent a squad out to investigate.

Mark uses this verse to alert us to the fact that the opposition to Jesus' ministry is now shifting – whereas before the occasional group of local leaders would raise an issue, Jesus is increasingly under the eye of the folks at Headquarters. Again, Jesus wants his followers to know that the primary relationship in their spiritual lives is not with an institution in another city, but rather with a Creator who loves them, who knows them, who teaches them, and who guides them.

As we read this passage today, we are also installing officers and leaders for the congregation. This passage is a challenge to any of us who would assume a position of leadership in the congregation, because it points to the tension we encounter as we seek to honor the voices of those who have come before us, yet point directly to the source of our hope and strength.

John Knox loved and appreciated the ministry of John Calvin, and Knox himself has been loved by the Scots. The Malawians loved and respected Henry Henderson and those who have followed him – but the trick is to make sure that what we are handing down is the real and utter truth, not just the uniforms.

Similarly, those of us who are called to leadership in this time and place enter into these offices with an awareness that our primary call is not to maintain a society that looks like nineteenth-century Scotland or sixteenth-century Switzerland or Twenty-first century Malawi. Our call is to be attentive to the fact that God is speaking to the church right now, and that God longs to reveal himself

to this neighborhood, this city, through this congregation. As officers of the church, you are not primarily charged with maintaining an institution; you are charged with making sure that this congregation is poised and ready to help every member be ready to grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

The only way to do that, of course, is to be attentive to your own spiritual walk. To make sure that your heart is shaped by Jesus.

A couple of weeks ago, we distributed a set of by-laws that will change slightly the administrative structure of the church. As officers, you would do well to read them and come to the congregational meeting in February ready to vote on them. But those by-laws and any other document that we come up with are nothing more than a strategy to help us do the real task that is at hand: be the church of Jesus Christ for this time and this place.

You know, in the story I told at the beginning of this message, you might be tempted to hear me saying that people who wear long black outfits on sunny days in equatorial regions are a little daffy. But I don't keep going back to Africa for wardrobe tips. What you need to know about the funeral we attended is that is lifted up for hundreds of people in that village the truth that the life we share in Jesus is more powerful than the grave that will eventually hold us all. You need to know that we experienced that day the truth that resurrection is stronger than death, and that community is better than isolation.

I'm sure that there are times here when you see me or another leader doing something that points backwards and find yourself saying, "What's that about?" My hope and prayer, however, is that as a pastor; as elders, deacons, and leaders; as a church – that we are conveying every day the grace, the hope, the truth that is to be found in Jesus Christ. The music we sing, the structure we choose, and the policies we adopt – well, they ought to simply point us more deeply in that direction. In Jesus Christ, there is life. May all we say and do point to that today and always. Amen.