

**August 30, 2015 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope**

**Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9, Psalm 15**  
**James 1:17-27, Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**

**Grace and peace to you, beloved of Christ. Amen.**

**Anxiety.**

Diana Butler Bass writes about being led through an exercise in centering prayer during a workshop.

Each participant was asked to listen for a word or phrase on which to meditate.

The leader had a nice one, “Holy and Blessed”, breathe your sacred word, over and again, the leader said.

But the only word that God was giving to Diana Butler Bass that day was Anxiety.

Anxiety. This is how she begins, really sets up, her book Christianity for the Rest of Us.

Diana Butler Bass is a historian and researcher of the mainline church.

She studies them (really, us) looking for the marks of vitality in congregations, regular congregations,

neighborhood churches, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Congregationalists, Methodists, Presbyterians.

She writes, “Most of my life has been a search for authentic spiritual community, a church with its eyes wide to the world, nothing phony or contrived. As the priest tried to center us in prayer [and anxiety was the word on my heart], I wondered if we instead needed to be decentered, to be more realistic about the current state of affairs and imagine what possibilities God might have for us.” (pg. 2). [PAUSE]

**There is tension and more than a fair bit of de-centering anxiety in our Gospel this morning.**

Jesus, the child of the tradition, is at odds once again with the Pharisees and some of the Scribes.

They are watching closely, and *their* anxiety is piqued when Jesus’ disciples eat with unwashed hands.

For the Scribes and Pharisees, Deuteronomy is in their ear, it’s all about tradition, tradition, tradition:

*following* the mandates of the elders,

*observing* the tradition as it’s been passed down, a sacred mantel, through the generations,

*policing* the community—and especially Jesus—for infringements on said tradition.

With the words of the Prophet Isaiah close at hand, Jesus that day accuses the Pharisees and Scribes of holding too fast to human tradition, and in turn abandoning the true commandments of God.

Today’s readings are about tradition, but more deeply: authority, and anxiety, and even de-centering.

**Just in case you are counting**, I’ve been with you now for 3 ½ weeks; they’ve been a full, rich 3 ½ weeks.

Last Sunday our family had a long time commitment to be with my daughter Eliza’s birth family for a reunion.

That took me away from worship and I’m grateful for Eric Ringham and Pastor Esther stepping in.

Not seeing me in worship, a few of you joked with me that you worried it was just too much, I’d up and quit!

Hear me out, dear people of God: it couldn't be farther from the truth.

The more I learn about Hope and the more I get to know so many of you, the more this is the community and place to which I am called, and this is a ministry to which WE together are called.

In these early weeks I am absorbing... everything, or trying to, at least!

**In between hearing your stories** and sharing my own, I'm trying to figure out the "rules", if you will, of this congregation, this community, and also your traditions and values.

Let's be honest, that's not so different from what anyone new to the community is doing.

What makes this congregation tick?

What has always been this way and is truly at the core of who and what God calls Hope to be?

And, what has always been this way, but we forget why, and don't really like or need it any more?

In between that, there are traditions that need refreshment, for they are good and blessed, vital.

And surely there are some other traditions that need attention, realignment, with the mission at hand.

Let's be honest: talk of tradition often raises anxiety. Are you feeling it? It's okay to name that.

It raised anxiety for the Scribes and Pharisees and Jesus that day so long ago;

it does for Diana Butler Bass; it does for many of us who are seeking vital, living ways to be church.

**Jaroslav Pelikan was for decades** a professor of church history, and Christian history, at Yale University.

He wrote once, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."

He continued, "And, I suppose I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name."

It's traditionalism that Jesus counters in today's Gospel,

And it's traditionalism, for which Jesus lives and dies—Jesus is doing something new.

The good news of the Gospel is Christ's power to open us and our communities to a living faith, forgiven,

claimed, beloved, daily acting, changing for the sake of the world,

not for the sake of how it's supposed to be, or how it's always been, but for the sake of the world.

(Down to the floor)

**I asked some of you this week about Hope's traditions—what a fun discussion!**

I'll share the responses with you in a moment, but take a minute now and make some notes on your bulletin:

Two questions, connected questions, you can answer one, or the other, or both:

**Briefly, what are University Lutheran Church of Hope's "Rules"—written or unwritten?**

**And what are a few of Hope's traditions?**

(If you are visiting or new to this community and feeling stumped, pick some other community of which you're a part and reflect on their rules and traditions.)

**Here are some of the phrases I've been hearing:**

A value is taping the amazing talent of our gifted musicians!

Adult forums that are informative and feisty, drawing us in and pulling us out.

Quote, "We love our Process." And the reflection that it's generally a healthy process and leaders are trusted.

A tradition and value of strong and smart lay leadership.

An appreciation and openness to having kids in worship, and sending youth off to Camp Amnicon or the Youth Gathering with prayers.

We talked about Hope's long tradition of faithfully engaging social issues, often in public ways.

Pastor Preus comes to mind, working with Dr. King and changing the shape of the civil rights movement in the Twin Cities by this involvement, or Pastor Erdahl speaking to the arms movement, I'll add my voice and presence to this public witness, too, and I'll share what I am learning and experiencing along the way.

There is a strong tradition in campus ministry, and at once a need to reinvigorate our involvement.

Welcome back students is a great example of this.

I'd love to hear what you wrote, so pop me a note or catch me to chat, or talk with one another over coffee!

**What Jesus is getting at,** what the gospel is getting at, is thoughtful reflection on the purpose of our traditions.

Why do we do what we do?

Is it because we're so entrenched we can't get out, or so and so will be angry, or disappointed?

Or is it because it's living and vital, a call from God, part of God's mission? I hope more often it's the latter.

When Diana Butler Bass names anxiety at the start of her book, she clarifies that this is a common emotion for churches in this time in history.

She goes on to pick out 10 sign posts of renewing and vital congregations.

These 10 are most truly practices, ways of being Christian, of being church, that in the very doing make us more what God invites and intends us to be.

I'd love to spend 10 weeks looking at these with a group of you—let me know if you're interested!

I'll conclude by naming them, and as I do, consider how each practice is meaningful for you, or for Hope.

Here you go: Hospitality-welcoming the stranger, discernment-listening for truth, healing-entering shalom, contemplation-open for prayer, testimony-talking the walk, diversity-making community, justice-engaging the powers, worship-experiencing God, reflection-thinking theologically, and beauty-touching the divine.

May the renewing power of the gospel shape and reshape our community, and our lives. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray: Christ, our center and our heart, decenter us so that we can find you again, renew in us a living and active faith, fill us again with your love and a passion to live for you. Amen.