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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, February 28, 2024  
Matthew 15:1-20  
Self-Chosen Good Works

HOLY GOSPEL .....Matthew 15:1-20, NRSV  
*Last week we read about Jesus walking on the water and healing the sick at  
Gennes'aret. Now Jesus stands up for his holy commandments.*

<sup>1</sup>Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, <sup>2</sup>"Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat." <sup>3</sup>He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? <sup>4</sup>For God said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.' <sup>5</sup>But you say that whoever tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,' then that person need not honor the father. <sup>6</sup>So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. <sup>7</sup>You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: <sup>8</sup>"This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; <sup>9</sup>in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines." <sup>10</sup>Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: <sup>11</sup>it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." <sup>12</sup>Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" <sup>13</sup>He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. <sup>14</sup>Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." <sup>15</sup>But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." <sup>16</sup>Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? <sup>17</sup>Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? <sup>18</sup>But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. <sup>19</sup>For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. <sup>20</sup>These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This evening's Bible Lesson gives me a chance to share one of my favorite Luther passages. Old-timers here at Immanuel have probably heard me read this passage more than once. It is a passage about self-chosen good works. That is what ails the Pharisees and scribes in this evening's reading. They care more about the "tradition of the elders" than they care about the

commandments of God. So, I mean to go into that in a bit, but let me begin with my Luther quote. It comes from Luther's *Large Catechism* — from his final reflections on the Ten Commandments. Luther says this:

It seems to me that we shall have our hands full to keep these commandments, practicing gentleness, patience, love toward enemies, chastity, kindness, etc., and all that is involved in doing so. But such works are not important or impressive in the eyes of the world. They are not uncommon and showy, reserved to certain special times, places, rites, and ceremonies, but are common, everyday domestic duties of one neighbor to another, with nothing glamorous about them. Those other deeds captivate all eyes and ears. Aided by great splendor, expense, and magnificent buildings, they are so adorned that everything gleams and glitters. There is burning of incense, singing and ringing of bells, lighting of candles and tapers until for all of this nothing else can be seen or heard. For when a priest stands in a golden chasuble or a layperson spends a whole day in the church on his or her knees, that is considered a precious work that cannot be sufficiently extolled. But when a poor servant girl takes care of a little child or faithfully does what she is told, this is regarded as nothing. (Luther, *Large Catechism*, Kolb-Wengert Edition)

Luther here is making a point that Jesus made long ago in this evening's Bible passage. Jesus tells the Pharisees and scribes that they would have their hands good and full if they would devote themselves to God's commandments, but instead they dwell on the "tradition of the elders." He does not dignify this tradition by calling it the "tradition of Moses," but rather of the "elders." Jesus is referring to the huge accumulation of rules written over the centuries by the elders of Israel, specifying ways they figured a pious person ought to live.

So, when the disciples dive into their supper without washing their hands, the Pharisees and scribes are quick to notice and to question Jesus about it. Well, for Pete's sake! It is indeed good to wash our hands before eating. But that is a small matter compared to the divine commandment asking us to honor our father and mother.

Jesus, then, calls the Pharisees and scribes on this commandment:

<sup>4</sup>For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him surely die.' <sup>5</sup>But you say, 'If any one tells his father or

his mother, What you would have gained from me is given to God, he need not honor his father.'

Now, the original intention behind such a procedure might have been good and pious. But you can see that it is a procedure prone to abuse. Remember, this ancient society did not have our modern systems of Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. If old folks were going to have dignity in their final years, it was because their family took care of them. But this particular "tradition of the elders" permitted grown children to shield their property from supporting their parents. The children could simply claim that they had pledged the property to the Temple.

It seems to me that even in the best of cases, this procedure was a doubtful one. The best case would be that the children follow through on their pledge and actually give the property to the Temple or to the synagogue. The worst case would be that it was all a trick... that the children kept the money for themselves, giving it neither to God nor to their parents. But even the best case is pretty hard-hearted. By what right do the children set aside the divine commandment to honor their parents and substitute the practice of giving their money to the church? The children might say that, "Well, it is a respected tradition of the elders." But Jesus does not buy it.

Going back to Luther's defense of the servant girl who takes care of a little child, there is nothing necessarily wrong with a golden chasuble and incense and the ringing of bells and so forth. But we must remember that these are human traditions. Often they are good, but they are not good if we become so wrapped up in them that we neglect the weightier matters of God's holy law. We have a commandment to honor our parents. We have no commandment to shield our property by saying that we had pledged it to the church.

So, this evening's passage is about seeing the forest for the trees. You and I might be whipped around by all kinds of popular convictions. Popular culture and politically correct notions abound, and often they impact us. But this evening's Bible passage asks us to give some thought to our ways of life. Even if everyone else on the face of the earth is doing something that conflicts with God's commandments, we should bow out. We should be the exception. We should be the ones who stand up and say, "But I think there is a better way of life available to us." Sometimes, this is what taking up the cross and following Jesus means for us. It means that we will walk our own path. We will go it alone if need be. Glad to say, we will not be alone, because we will still have the Church and him who is Lord of the Church, even Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.