J: Welcome to the Dunker Punks Podcasts. I'm your host, Jacob Crouse. One of my favorite elements of this podcast is getting to hear people from different backgrounds and geographies. This week it's pretty Virginia, though, as our theme today is brought to us again by Christa Craighead, a student at Bridgewater College and originally from my old stomping grounds in Franklin County. As you listen to this episode, I'd encourage you to think about what's beneath a lot of the rituals and even just activities that you do. What drives them. I'm excited to hear what Christa has to share with us today. Let's listen.

Christa: I want you to take a minute and think back to what your favorite thing to do growing up was. My two younger brothers and I grew up in Calloway, Virginia, which is kind of far back in the country. So our favorite thing to do every afternoon after school and all day on the weekends, was to play outside until it was dark. Probably our favorite thing to do was to find different hidden little places around the creek and up in the woods, where we would build forts with each other. And the one thing that my mom always made sure to tell us before we went outside, to build those forts and to play in the woods, was not to get our clothes dirty. That was the one thing that she warned us about every time we went to play outside. And inevitably, every time that we came back in the house, our clothes were dirty. Now, on my brother's part, his clothes may have been dirty because sometimes he wanted to spite our mom, (laugh) and get his
clothes dirty just because she said not to. But from my end, my clothes got dirty in the process of just loving life outside. It was never something that I intentionally did. It was just a side effect of the great time that I was having while building those forts or stomping through the creek or laying in the pine needles. I didn't really think about the state of my clothes. I was too busy enjoying being in the moment, being one with that creation, and just appreciating the fact that I got to live somewhere where I could be outside and be filled with that excitement, that joy, and that playfulness every single day of my life.

When we would finally come inside, after being outside all day and getting dirt and mud all over our jeans and our shirts, our mom would give a big sigh, and she looked at it. And then she’d throw it in the washer (laughter) to get the stains out. And this cycle went on for a majority of my life, my childhood growing up, until I reached middle school. And there was one particular instance in middle school that sticks out to me that I will never forget. In middle school, it's common that kids develop these stigmas and these stereotypes that they cling to. And there's kind of a bar that everyone is held to, a standard for the way that they look and the way that they act and the things that they have, that's kind of unnatural and unprecedented in any other point in our lives.

One day in my social studies class, I sat near the back and I walked in and I took a seat and one of the boys sitting beside me started laughing, and I looked over at him and he pointed to my shoes and my jeans and there were mud stains on the knees of my jeans, and my shoes had pieces of mud cakes to him, and he was laughing at the fact that I came to school looking so dirty. (laughter) And I remember at the time, it really affected me. (emotionally) It really hurt my feelings that this kid had chosen to make fun of just what I happened to be wearing and the way that I looked. Because here I was in middle school, thinking that I haven't lived up to this standard that I was supposed to. I haven't presented myself in the way that other middle schoolers do in the way that is popular and acceptable. And I remember thinking to myself, like, this kid just doesn't get it.

The stains on my jeans and the mud on my shoes came from this glorious experience that I got to have outside, something that he obviously had never experienced for himself. He was making fun of the mud stains on my jeans that I had worn kind of proudly, thinking “Look at what I get to experience. I have stains on my jeans, because I am living this glorious life where I am one with creation and I get to spend my days with the Earth.” After that moment, I took a little more care, when it came to the way that I dressed, the things that I wore into middle school, because it seemed like the state of my clothes, that standard that had been set, was expected of me. That we were supposed to look a certain way to be accepted.

This all got me thinking about Jesus and the disciples and how it seems like they are constantly coming into conflict with these standards and traditions that had been set for themselves by the Jewish Laws, the leaders of the Law, who believed that Jesus and his followers weren’t really living their lives for God in the right way, because they weren't following these old standards and ceremonies that were present in the law. I want you to take another minute now, and think, “what is a tradition that your church or your body of believers clings tightly to?”

In my own home church, the one tradition that it seems like we hold to so tightly is the tradition of the acolyte. In our church, a child is supposed to stand out in the hallway until they hear the invocation music, and when the music starts, they slowly walk the acolyte inside, and they light the left candle and then the right candle, and then they sit down. At the end of the service, they get up and they go back up, and there's a certain order to it. They lit the left first and
then the right, so they extinguish the left first. They re-light the acolyte and then extinguish the right one, and they carry the light out the door. There's beautiful symbolism behind the tradition of the acolyte; but in my church, as numbers have slowly dwindled and the amount of kids that we have has dwindled along with those numbers, we don't always have somebody who's ready to be the acolyte on Sunday. And this has never seemed like that big of a deal to me.

I come into church so I can have that experience of God, so I can sing and I can be with this body of believers and family, and I can just have that moment of connection with humanity. It isn't, to me, so much about the tradition that I experience while I'm there. The tradition is just something that always has been, and I know that it's kind of expected that it always will be there. Some of the older members of my congregation, however, they tend to freeze up, and become agitated, over the fact that we don't have an acolyte, ready, at attention, to light the candle on Sunday. And it reminds me of a story that could be found in the book of Matthew, and Mark, and Luke. Reading from the Book of Mark, starting with chapter seven. It's titled “That Which Defiles”. “The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem, gathered around Jesus, and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. The Pharisees and all the Jews did not eat unless they gave their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash, and they observe many other traditions such as the washing of cups and pitchers and kettles. So the Pharisees and the teachers of the law asked Jesus, ‘Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders, instead of eating their food with defiled hands?’

So I ask you, here again, to think, “What is a tradition within your own church, that it seems like people cling to very tightly?” “Jesus replies, Isaiah was right when he prophesized about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain. Their teachings are merely human rules.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding onto human traditions. And, he continued, You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions. Again, Jesus called the crowd to him and said, Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside of a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them. After he had left the crowd and he entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. Are you so dull? he asked. Don't you see? What comes out of a person defiles them. For it is written, that out of a person's heart, evil thoughts may come. But don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them?”

The life that I lived growing up and the life that I continue to live where I love being outside of love, being in creation. That is what I live for. The dirt that may get on my pants and the process is beside the point. I'm out there because I feel such a genuine connection to the Spirit. I am filled with joy, I am filled with blessings, just by being outside. The disciples were traveling with the Son of God. They were living their devotion to the scriptures. Washing their hands before a meal, the tradition that the Pharisees and some of the Jewish leaders felt was so important, Jesus immediately calls the traditions out for what they are. Nothing more than ceremony. Nothing that can actually replace the feeling of God working within your life. Jesus tries to make this point clear to his disciples and the people following him. That's why he literally repeats himself three times to them. He says that it's not about what is on the outside of a person. Nothing that is on the outside can defile that which is within. Some dirt on your hands or some dirt on your pants, it's not gonna change the work that you do for God. When living and working with someone as divine as Christ. The disciples saw that their traditions weren’t really
what mattered, at all. The Pharisees and some of the Jewish leaders who had yet to accept who Jesus was, had a harder time letting go of those things that had defined their religious experience.

But when we get right down to the basis of this story, Jesus is trying to reveal that our relationship with God is something far more real, and far less hung up on tradition and ceremony. The tradition that we cling to, as a church, just like the stigmas that middle schoolers hold on to. And just like the ceremonies that the Pharisees and the Jews followed so strictly. Those are all so beside the point, the point of Jesus’ ministry, the entire point off following somebody that we call Christ, is understanding that our lives are a reflection, of that God that we follow. The dirt on our hands or the dirt on our jeans. (background music begins, continues to the end of the episode) That's all beside the point. When we are living, our true Christ-like lives were embodying the mission of Jesus. When we are serving, we are connecting, we are loving. That's when we know that we are living out the Holy Spirit, present day. Everything else, is just ceremony, and nothing that happens on the outside of our bodies can ever defile that which is within, in that which we outwardly practice. The dirt on the Pharisee’s hands, the dirt on the hands of Jesus and his disciples, just like the dirt on my jeans, are a reflection of a life well lived for Christ. And washing that off, is nothing more than tradition.

J: Our lives are a reflection of the God that we follow. Everything else, everything outside is just ceremony. There's so many quotes and takeaways from Christa's musings. I love it. What really struck me in what she said, was, how when you peel back to what's behind the rituals we do, whether in church or otherwise, they really do lead back to our core values and beliefs. The tradition is representative of a deeper vision. I think that's why it's so great to me that young persons, especially young Brethren, are kind of taking their traditions and keeping them alive by making them their own. I mean, rituals and traditions are meaningful because they remind us of our identity, as well as proclaiming our beliefs. That's part of why I rock a Brethren Beard. It's traditional, sure, but meaningful as well. The pacifist Anabaptists started shaving off their moustaches and growing big old neck beards, because it differentiated them from the military who could only wear mustaches. Since beards are pretty popular now, though, I cut my hair into a mullet hock just for good, punky measure. It's my own take on that tradition, I suppose. What are yours?

I definitely encourage you this week to think about where your traditions and ceremonies come from. What's at the heart of them. How do you, how will you get dirty from a life well lived?

Dunker Punks Podcast is just a bunch of hard working, ripped and dirty jean wearing folks from all over. Like Grandpa says, “You ain't done work if you ain't dirty.” This episode was created by Kristen Craighead. I'm your host and editor, Jacob Crouse. Kerrick van Asselt creates graphics, Dean Feasenhiser transcribes our episodes. Suzanne Lay manages production. The Arlington Church of the Brethren hosts and sponsors the show. On Earth Peace provides ongoing outreach and production support. You can find archives of the podcast on iTunes and online at Arlington C O B dot org slash dpp (arlingtoncob.org/dpp). Connect with the show on social media at Dunker Punks Pod or just by emailing us at D P P @ Arlington C O B dot org (ddp@arlingtoncob.org). Stay tuned for our next show coming up in a couple of weeks. Peace.