

SERMON

+ Pentecost 15; Lectionary 22 B

September 1, 2024

Traditions have a lot to do with our identity.
They help make us who we are.
And who we are determines
many of our traditions.

For example,
the tradition of what we do and say in Christian worship
was established by the earliest gathering of believers,
when on the day of Pentecost,
they were filled with the Holy Spirit
and gathered together,
devoting themselves to “the apostles’ teachings and fellowship,
the breaking of bread and the prayers”
as it’s recorded in Acts. (Acts 2:42)

These are the things we do
when we gather for worship
over 2000 years later.

Traditions also give us,
not only a faith identity,
but the identity of our family heritage,
our ethnic culture,
and our nationality.

How we celebrate holidays, for example –
and Christmas may be the best example –
is rooted deeply in our family tradition
and our ethnic culture,
with traditions we learned as children
often combined with traditions
we established in our own generation.

But a great theologian once made an important distinction when he said,
“Traditions are the living witness of the dead,
Traditionalism is the dead witness of the living.”

(Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Melody of Theology*, p. 252)

Traditionalism is like doing certain things
because we have always done it that way
without really knowing why, or what the action means.
Or, it's surrounding traditions handed on to us
with so many other things not of the tradition
that we lose sight of the tradition itself.

The story goes that whenever a certain family roasted a ham,
they would cut off the end
and lay it in the roaster alongside the ham.

One day, one of the children asked why.
I don't know, was the answer.
We do it because my mother always did it.
Why did you do it, Mother?
I always did it because my mother always did it, she said.

Granny, they asked,
why did you cut off the end of the ham to roast it?
To let the juices flow? To expose the flavor?

No, she replied,
because I only had a small roasting pan
and I had to cut it to fit.

Weddings in our culture are a notorious example
of tradition turned to traditionalism.
The official magazines and generations of practice
lead us to believe that there are certain practices
that are required or expected of a wedding
that are actually rooted in the practices and expectations
of a day and a culture that is long past.

Why, for instance, is it bad luck
for the groom to see the bride before the wedding service,
especially these days when, over half the time,
they wake up that morning together in the same bed?

How do you give away a person?
Why does the bride sometimes wear a veil over her face?
Why does she throw her flower bouquet away
for the yet unwed girls to catch?
How did we ever begin the practice
of pelting the departing couple with rice?
These are some of the things we expect to see, aren't they.

Yet all these traditions
come from medieval times and before,
when the father owned his virgin daughter as property,
her marriage was arranged with the father of her groom –
who often did not even see his bride
until they reached the altar and he lifted her veil,
and the point of the marriage
was not their love or happiness, but fertility: lots of children.

The traditions that grew out of that culture and world
that made sense in that context
have become over the generations for us, traditionalisms,
so that we do them thinking it's the right and only way,
without knowing why, or what the practice means.

That, says Jesus,
is what has happened to the Jewish leaders over the years
with their practice of ritual washing.

In an attempt to preserve the law of God from being breeched,
they have surrounded the law of God
with laws of their own making –
what Jesus calls human tradition.
And in time, they have come to regard those traditions of the elders
as the most important.

It's as if the original law said,
you can't touch this pole
that stands in the middle of this field.

And so to be sure that no one touched the pole,
the authorities built a fence in a wide circle around the pole

to keep people away,
and kept guard dogs inside the fence
to ensure they wouldn't try to cross the fence.

You can imagine that it wouldn't take long
before the main concern
was not touching the pole,
but maintaining the fence and feeding the dogs.

Just that naturally – and with the best of intentions –
we can evolve from being people of a tradition
to being people of traditionalisms.
From the living witness of the dead
to the dead witness of the living.

Understand, these rules that surround the law aren't bad –
the practices and rituals aren't in themselves wrong or evil.
Unless they become the ends themselves
rather than the means that point us
to the great truth behind them,
as Jesus accuses the Pharisees and scribes of doing.

That, says Jesus,
is when it's time to refocus our attention
back on the fundamentals.

And he points us back to the ways of the kingdom he brings,
the promises and responsibilities of our baptismal covenant,
the great commission to follow,
and the commandments to love God and love one another.

He points us to the scriptures, not just the rules,
to the faith that is not just saying, but also living and doing,
to a belief that is trust in the heart
and not just a code of correct behavior.

Because the point of traditions is
that they point us beyond themselves
to the truth behind them:
to the truth of scripture,

the discipleship of faith,
the trust of one in love with the Lord,
the Lord Jesus himself.

It's tradition, in part, that keeps us
in the knowledge and love of the Lord and his ways.

Tradition is God's wonderful gift to us,
as is faith itself,
and his law of love,
and all that forms and molds us
to make us who we are –
holy and beloved children of God.

Gathering around the apostles' teaching –
or the word of scripture – and fellowship,
the breaking of bread and prayers –
these are some of the traditions handed down to us
as worshiping believers and followers of Jesus –
signs that point beyond themselves
to the love and presence,
forgiveness and life of God for us.

Thanks be to God
for that wonderful, gracious gift.