

Wesley United Methodist Church

November 10, 2019

"Traditions."

Luke 20:27-40

Tradition. What a concept. What do you think when you hear the word tradition? Exactly what is tradition? Mr. Webster's dictionary defines the word tradition as "the transmission of knowledge, opinions, customs, doctrines, and practices from generation to generation, originally by word of mouth and personal example." We have all inherited traditions from our ancestors, which we will in turn pass on to future generations. And traditions are important.

Even now we're looking forward to Thanksgiving and Christmas, seasons filled with all kinds of traditions, visits with relatives, some of whom we haven't seen since this time last year; a turkey dinner with all the trimmings. Although the definition of what "all the trimmings" means, varies from family to family. Christmas decorations, with a specific time for putting them up and taking them down, and a specific place for putting the tree. "Mother always put the tree in that corner, you know." Translation: "You'll put it somewhere else over my dead, lifeless body." Sending Christmas cards, or not sending Christmas cards; exchanging gifts, or not exchanging gifts.

The church also has traditions, such as community worship services, children's Christmas programs, and Christmas Eve Candlelight services. Many times, in the church, if we do something more than once, it automatically becomes a tradition! And we love and honor those traditions. They are a part of who we are, and they help us to maintain some sense of balance in our lives.

Tradition is a good thing, but even good things can be carried to the extreme. When honoring traditions is taken to the extreme, it can become traditionalism, and like most other isms, traditionalism can be very harmful. Traditionalism, by definition, is "a system of faith founded on tradition; adherence to tradition; especially undue reverence for tradition in religious matters." Sometimes, because of traditionalism, we do what we do without really knowing why we do it, other than that's just the way we've always done it. A dangerous practice at last.

Let me share an illustration that I have used before not so long ago.

A new husband watched curiously as his bride prepared to place a ham in the oven. Before putting it in to cook, she took a knife and carefully trimmed off both ends of the ham. The husband asked, "Why did you do that? I'm not an expert at cooking hams, but I don't think I ever saw anyone cut off both ends of the ham before cooking it."

The wife answered, "You know, I don't really know. I never cooked a ham before, but that's the way my mother always did it." Her curiosity aroused, she telephoned her mother and asked her why she always cut off both ends of a ham before she cooked it. "Now that you mention it, I don't know, dear," her mother replied. "That's just the way your grandmother always did it. Other than that, I honestly don't have a clue."

Determined now to unravel this mystery, the young bride called her grandmother and asked her why she always cut off both ends of the ham before she cooked it. "Well, sweetheart," her grandmother said, "the first oven we owned wasn't big enough to put a whole ham in, so I had to cut the ends of to make it fit. After that, I guess, it became a habit."

That's traditionalism. When we do what we do without knowing why we do it but continue to do it anyway because that's what we've always done! Does that make sense?

Some of the people who were most vocal in their opposition to Jesus were people who were bound to tradition, determined to make sure that things were done the way they always were done in the church. Jesus had a lot of problems with those folks. He had run the moneychangers out of the temple, and that event set off a series of confrontations between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day. Time and again they would attempt to trap Jesus into making a mistake, one that would allow them to do away with this trouble-making Galilean once and for all. In the chapter preceding this one, they had asked Jesus two tricky questions. The first concerned the source of Jesus' authority, and the second was about paying tribute to Caesar. In answering their questions with questions of his own, Jesus made the religious leaders look awfully foolish.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Luke finds the enemies of Jesus still trying to trap him into an error, posing yet another tricky question. The subject this time is the resurrection of the dead, and the fact that the leadership of the religious community was sharply divided over the issue made this an even more delicate question for Jesus to handle.

There were two ruling groups in the religious hierarchy of the synagogue. There was the priestly class, the Sadducees. Many of them were wealthy, and so they considered themselves the rulers of the church. They were the old line, hard shell believers, the ones who adhered strictly to ancient tradition and dogma. They didn't believe in the resurrection because they couldn't find no teaching concerning resurrection in THEIR Bible, which was the Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Old Testament. Everything God had to say to humanity was recorded in Genesis, Exodus, Numbers,

Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. If you couldn't find what you were looking for in those five books, God didn't say it. PERIOD!

The other ruling class, the Pharisees, believed that there WAS a written tradition about the resurrection of the dead handed down from Moses, as well as an oral tradition (which the Sadducees would not accept because it wasn't written in THEIR Bible.) The Pharisees said that anyone who denied the resurrection of the dead had stinky feet, didn't love God, and wouldn't have any part in the world which was yet to come. In other words, the Pharisees were just as inflexible as the Sadducees. Resurrection was often a subject of heated debate between the two groups.

So, in the scripture reading for today, we find the Sadducees playing a little head game with Jesus to find out which side of the issue he supports. "Now, Jesus, we don't believe in resurrection, and you're not going to convince us otherwise, so your opinion on it really doesn't matter, but we'd really like to know what you think about it."

Their question concerned a woman's marital status in the next life which they didn't believe in anyway. Specifically, they wanted to know, if a woman had been married seven times to seven brothers, each of whom had preceded her in death, whose wife would she be in the resurrection life?

Now, as silly as it may seem, there were actually laws governing situations such as this. According to the Law of Moses, it was the duty of a dead man's oldest brother to provide for the widow, which meant he had to marry her. If the resurrection life is simply an extension of this life, the potential for domestic strife is unlimited in the situation the Sadducees described to Jesus here. Imagine this poor woman finding seven former husbands waiting for her on the other side of the pearly gates. I can't help but believe she would be going back to check the sign on the gate to make sure it really did say "Heaven!"

Of course, the question was totally absurd! The Sadducees were so bound to their tradition that nothing Jesus said could really make any difference to them or change them in any way. But that doesn't mean Jesus didn't try.

Jesus explained to them that conditions in the next life just cannot be compared with life in the here and now. It's an Apples and oranges thing. "If you knew your scripture as well as you think you do," Jesus says, "you would know that God's power to provide is far greater than our greatest longing. If resurrection is a gift of God, who else has the power to grant new life? Then the resurrection life cannot possibly be a continuation of the imperfect life we live here. God is not the God of the dead, but of the living! Marriage is appropriate in this life, but do you really think we'll need that to cement our relationships in the next life? Tradition is fine, as far as it goes, but you're taking it too far here."

The apostle Paul, in his letter of encouragement to the struggling church at Thessalonica, wrote, "Stand firm and hold fast to the traditions we taught you, either by word of mouth or by our letters" (2 Thessalonians 2:15). Tradition is important. But tradition has to leave room for revelation, because the Spirit blows where it wills, right? That has always been a problem in the church, from day one to this day. We don't seem to want to leave any room for revelation when we're talking about tradition.

Have you ever introduced something new at church and heard that answer, "WE NEVER DID IT THAT WAY BEFORE!" as the final words on the subject matter? These have been called "the seven last words of the church," and in many cases they have been.

The church is called to be the agent of change in the world. The purpose of the church, then is to change the world by changing people in the world, one at a time. Not to preserve the status quo, to keep things the way they've always been, as the religious leaders of Jesus' day tried to do. The church is to be God's tool bringing about change in the world, and we must be willing to be used up for the sake of the world. If we blindly dedicate ourselves to the preservation of all things traditional, how can we ever hope to bring about change?

I don't begrudge anyone fond memories of the way the church used to be. I have a treasure chest full of those myself. But please, let's not confine God to sentimental memories of the way we were. Let's not lock Jesus up in memories of the church as it used to be, where we sang all the same old songs and prayed the same old prayers, or did not pray the prayers of the church, and fought the same old battles over and over, the main one being whether or not the church was a business and ought to be governed as one. Please! The church is the body of Christ, not General Motors...

The point is that the past is the past. It's gone! Things will never be like that again. The world is constantly changing, and Jesus cannot be buried in the past. No grave has ever been able to hold him, remember?

We are called to acknowledge God's ownership of all things, including and especially the church. We are called to seek God in the events of every day, because that's where our faith is tried and tested, not in our yesterdays but in our todays. "We never did it that way before" could be very well the last words of the church, this church or any other. Although God does accept us as we are, God also expects us to become new creations in Jesus Christ. And new creations do not accept old limitations. Amen.