***TRADITION!***

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September 10, 2017

Texts: Exodus 12:1-14 and Romans 13:8-10

On the internet these days there are many enlightening things and some not so enlightening but entertaining things. There are spectacular pictures, theories to explain great scientific mysteries, bad jokes, and even answers to deep theological questions. Sometimes the answers to the deep theological questions vary depending on your religious tradition. For instance, there are a host of answers to the practical but deeply theological question: How many Christians does it take to change a light bulb?

Pentecostal:10 One to change the bulb, and nine to pray against the spirit of darkness.

Episcopalian: 15 One to call the electrician, one to mix the drinks and one to talk about how much better the old bulb was.

Baptist: 15+ One to change the light bulb, and three committees to approve the change and decide who brings the potato salad and fried chicken.

Unitarians choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the

need for a light bulb, but will take time in next week’s service to explore a number of light bulb traditions including incandescent, fluorescent, LED, and 3-way, all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence.

Presbyterian: 0 Lights will go on and off at predestined times.

I doubt that any of these answers have been officially sanctioned by their respective denominations, but each does draw on a particular tradition for which that branch of the Church family tree is known. We all have traditions of one sort or another that mark our faith and our practice of faith. Some of those traditions have Scriptural roots (like the Lord’s Supper and Passover); some have theological roots or historical roots, and some have roots that are long forgotten. In his novel *Good News from North Haven*, Michael Lindvall tells of the town’s Second Presbyterian Church:

*There is no First Presbyterian in town, and there hasn’t been for years. More than a century ago, the newly founded First – and then only – Presbyterian Church enjoyed a fine church fight. Folks still tell the story of the Sunday in June when half the congregation walked out during the sermon and founded Second Presbyterian. All memories agree as to what the fight was about: whether young women ought to lead discussions at Christian Endeavor meetings or keep a low profile and ask questions when they got home… What memories do not agree on is who was on what side. Some people now say that the Second Presbyterian group that left was in favor of women speaking at meetings; some say they were against it. Whatever the truth, everyone agrees that the Second Presbyterian Church was squarely established on the firm foundation of an important principle, even if no one is now quite sure what that principle was.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Sometimes institutional memories preserve traditions in the faith from which they arose, but sometimes they perpetuate conflicts or traditions that have long since lost their meaning. In his book *Civility* Stephen Carter suggests that there is a distinction between *tradition* and *traditionalism*. “Tradition celebrates the living faith of the dead” while “traditionalism… is the dead faith of the living.”[[2]](#endnote-2) We Presbyterians declare ourselves to be a church that is rooted in the Reformed tradition theologically while always being re-formed by the Holy Spirit; in so doing, we hope to preserve tradition while moving beyond traditionalism!

In the passage we read from Exodus this morning we hear God’s command to practice a tradition: Passover. The tradition is established in great detail. The meal is to be celebrated on the 10th day of the 1st month of the year. The meal is to consist of a lamb roasted (not boiled) with all its internal organs, unleavened bread and bitter herbs. There are to be no leftovers. The meal is to be eaten hurriedly as if preparing for a journey. Why observe this tradition in this particular way? To remind the people of God’s deliverance of their ancestors from bondage in Egypt when God sent the angel of death to kill the firstborn sons of the Egyptians while sparing the Israelites whose homes were marked by lamb’s blood compelling Pharaoh to say, “Let the people go!” For more than 3000 years this meal has been celebrated and God’s saving act remembered from generation to generation to generation.

The Passover tradition celebrates the living faith that has been passed down across those generations, faith in a God who does not forget God’s people, a God who saves, a God whose story is entwined in the stories of all God’s people across the ages. In celebrating Passover that story is retold and relived and remembered, affirming faith in the God who is central to the story and central to the faith. That is what good traditions do. As we recalled last week, our Christian tradition also has a meal celebrating God’s saving act – the Lord’s Supper. While the practice may vary from church to church – common cup or trays, pita bread or sourdough or wafers, wine or grape juice, communion or the Eucharist – the repeated words (This is my body; this is my blood) and the remembrance of God’s saving act in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus remain unchanged. It is a tradition that reminds us of what Christ did for us, a tradition that marks us as followers of Jesus each week as we gather around this table to worship God.

Baptism too is a tradition we share, a repeated practice across 2,000 years in which a child or teen or adult is sprinkled or splashed or dunked in water as sacred words are repeated, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” In so doing we mark that person as a child of God belonging in life and in death to Jesus Christ; we claim him or her as a brother or sister in Christ, a member of the family of faith. But we who gather for that baptism also make a promise – to share with that newly baptized child or teen or adult the love of Jesus and the good news of the gospel. In essence we promise to share the living traditions we have inherited from our ancestors in faith in order that this new generation of Christians may know Jesus and trust God with their very lives. It is not traditionalism that we seek to pass along, but our Christian tradition, the living faith which we claim and which we received from those saints who have gone before us and showed us what living faith looks like.

Across the years there have been times when the tradition has been corrupted by traditionalism, when the trappings of religion have been lifted up above the substance of faith. Some of you remember such times, days when blue laws claimed the title of essential Christian practice, when “your Sunday best” was the attire expected of all who came to worship God, when music had to fall within certain narrow parameters to be suitable for God’s praise, when the church seemed to claim that description of the University of Chicago: where fun goes to die. But that is not our tradition; that is traditionalism. Our tradition has good news to proclaim to all people, and God welcomes our worship and praise regardless of how we dress or what style of music sets our feet to tapping.

Can you distinguish the tradition from the traditionalism? What is that tradition, that living faith, that you embrace? Can you articulate it, describe it, but more importantly, do you live it? Would anyone watching you day to day know that you are Christian, and if so, what would they understand about that Christian tradition you claim, that tradition you pass on to the next generation of believers?

In Paul’s letter to the Romans we hear him remind us of that tradition that is deeply rooted in our faith – the Ten Commandments given by God through Moses to the people of Israel at the foot of Mt. Sinai. They offer expectations for us to live into our calling as the people of God. They are not the ten suggestions; they are the Ten Commandments. But lest they be misinterpreted or misappropriated Paul sums up all ten and more in these words: *Love your neighbor as yourself*! That is our tradition – a tradition of love, love in which we were created, love in which we were redeemed, love in which we are called to live as God’s people. Throw out all the blue laws and enact this law: *love your neighbor as yourself*. Make this the measure by which we decide what should be done with Confederate monuments: *love your neighbor as yourself*. Let all those flashing signs with catchy slogans in front of churches bear only these words: *love your neighbor as yourself*. Remind our lawmakers that no law they enact should ever violate this commandment: *love your neighbor as yourself*. Pass on this tradition to your children and grandchildren and neighbor’s children: *love your neighbor as yourself*. For, this is our tradition – the tradition we inherited, the tradition we pass on, the tradition that is the expression of our living faith: *love your neighbor as yourself*. And if you do live that way and love that way, then the world will know we are Christians – by our love. Amen

1. Michael Lindvall, *Good News from North Haven*, The Crossroad Publishing Co: New York, 2002, p.14 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Stephen L. Carter, *Civility*, Basic Books, 1998, p.86 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)