

Tradition

Easter 7 b
Ac.1.15-26

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There's a topic I'd like to address today that is very much hallowed within the Church of Jesus Christ. It's important to us in other ways as well. That topic is TRADITION.

Tradition is something that is generally hallowed by the generations. By repeating what our parents and grandparents did before us, we find common IDENTITY. By honoring those things that were honored by people before us, we find common VALUES. By saying and doing those things said and done by friends and family before us, we find ROOTEDNESS in the past and CONTINUITY for the present and the future.

With such identity, values, and rootedness in tradition, we feel safe and secure in the face of new things that confront and challenge us daily. From tradition, we can expect to venture forth into the future, carrying all that tradition gives us and allowing those things that tradition provides to permeate and affect that future.

There is hardly any aspect of life that does not contain some element of tradition. Families have traditions that are unique from family to family. Family traditions often dictate where and how certain family gatherings occur or how certain holidays are celebrated.

Communities have traditions that are established and helped along by various civic minded groups. Sometimes these interact with national traditions, like the various Memorial Day observances that will occur soon in cemeteries and elsewhere.

The Church, of course, also has its traditions. Much of what we do when we gather finds its roots in the first century and can be found in the Bible. We gather on Sunday when the Lord arose (Ac.20.7). When we gather, we break bread as early Christians did (Ac.20.7) and as Christ had commanded (Lk.22.19). We also read lessons and sing hymns and hear preaching, which is not only what the first Christians did (1 Cor.14.26f), but they had continued a tradition of worship found in the temple and synagogue and in the Psalms of the Jews that had existed for hundreds of years before.

Even what we read in the first lesson for today reflects a "traditional" approach to the first disciples and apostles of Christ. Jesus had chosen 12 men to be his disciples and chief witnesses and messengers of the resurrection. Their number was based on the fact that there had been 12 sons of Jacob and therefore 12 tribes to the chosen people of God. So Jesus' choice of 12 disciples kept with a tradition of God's people.

But now, after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, there were only 11 disciples. Judas had died by his own hand after betraying Jesus. It seemed prudent therefore that another should be chosen so that the number of disciples should again be complete as they began the mission of witnessing to the resurrection and gathering others to form the Church of Jesus Christ. The 11 prayed and then they cast lots -- both traditional ways of determining God's leading. And the lot fell on Matthias.

What was done there was probably more significant than what at first appears. By following what Christ had done in choosing 12 men, a tradition was kept. The manner in which they kept and honored that tradition was in itself traditional. Both acts said something very important:

First, it said that what Christ did and said were worthy of remembering, honoring and repeating -- without adding anything to it. And second, it said that while Christ and his resurrection had set forth new things, new teachings, and a new work among God's people -- especially in the resurrection itself -- still much of what was old and traditional had value: like seeking God's guidance in prayer before making decisions.

Throughout all the first lesson readings from Acts over these past seven weeks of Easter, we've watched as new churches were being started. At the same time, we seen how great care was taken to insure that what was being taught in those new churches was in line with these same principles of tradition. We recently heard that when Philip the deacon began a church in Samaria, Peter and John soon went there to see that their faith was the same faith that they knew from Jesus Christ. When other disciples were scattered to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem to see if faith and teaching in these churches was the same faith and teaching of the apostles in Jerusalem.

This was not because of some need for power or control or possessiveness on the part of the first Christians in Jerusalem. Nor was it for the sake of some nostalgic notion of "tradition" that often develops in families, communities, nations and even churches. Rather, the apostles were concerned that if the faith of these new churches was in any way different from the faith of the apostles in Jerusalem, then at that point it ceased to be the true faith of the Church of Jesus Christ. It ceased to be Christian.

What I'm talking about here is far more significant than what we normally think of as tradition. While it's true that tradition may help us with identity, values and rootedness, still the tradition that most of us know has a certain fluidness about it. It can change. Portions of it might even be dropped.

Family traditions change, because family members pass away and new members bring new ideas to the family. Community traditions change because community members change as communities develop or die. National traditions rise and fall with nations and governments themselves.

Even certain Church traditions are subject to change. How the church organizes itself is subject to change. Certain elements of worship are subject to change. The order is subject to change. The manner of communing is subject to change. The formality or informality of worship is subject to change. We've seen examples of all of that during the four years that I've been with you, and especially as a result of the pandemic year.

But the actions of the apostles in the book of Acts established a principle that stated that **SOME THINGS ARE NOT SUBJECT TO CHANGE -- EVER:** The content

of gospel faith in Jesus Christ is not subject to change. The teaching and preaching about Jesus Christ is not subject to change.

And to insure that these CORE BELIEFS were not subject to change, the apostles established a tradition of checks upon the churches and upon those who would teach and preach the gospel message. That's why Peter and John went to Samaria. That's why Barnabas was sent to Antioch. That's why the apostles wanted to spend time with the new convert Paul before sending him off on a preaching mission to the Gentiles (Ac.9.26-30). That's why Paul spent time with Timothy before laying hands on him and sending him off on his own (Ac.16.1-5). That's why teachers and preachers of each older generation spend time with would-be teachers and preachers of the next generation before ordaining them and sending them off on their own.

What I'm talking about here is Tradition with a capital "T." An APOSTOLIC TRADITION. Indeed, it's this tradition in which we confess faith when we say the Nicene Creed: "I believe in the one, holy, catholic and APOSTOLIC Church." In other words, we fully believe and take great pains to insure that our faith and our teaching is the very same faith and teaching that the apostles had received from Christ himself. That is the meaning of those words we speak in the creed.

And this lies at the heart of the call process that we are about to engage in. It is our full expectation that the pastors that our Call Committee will be interviewing are rooted in this same apostolic tradition. That's why the ELCA requires four years of seminary. So that our pastors have the same apostolic faith as the first apostles and teach from the same witness of the Holy Scriptures as the apostles. That's why the ELCA and all its bishops require all pastoral candidates to be thoroughly examined and approved by synod candidacy committees as being fully in the apostolic tradition of the Church of Jesus Christ.

It's all about tradition. An apostolic tradition. Rooted in the scriptures and the witness of those first apostles. Because that is the faith that we all hold dear.

In the face of a changing world, where there is little, traditional or otherwise, that can truly outlast all the challenges that come along, it is absolutely necessary that we have assurance that the foundations of our faith are sure and true -- that what we know of God and of his son Jesus Christ is something that we can count on.

The Bible holds the content of that faith. It is the apostolic witness passed on to us. It is a tradition that is sure and true. It is a measure against all that is new. And the Church and its pastors are the guardian of that Bible, of that tradition and of that faith.

Hold fast to that tradition. Hold fast to that apostolic faith. Always.