

Grace at Fifty: Traditioning and Visioning

I Cor. 15: 3-7

Acts 2:17

Matthew 5:17; 15:1-3

Today we began our celebration of Grace at 50! Or is it 51? The Pandemic has messed with our calendars. Over the next 6 months we will be celebrating it in a number of ways. Today I want us to look at two vital dimensions of being the church, this church and every church: *traditioning* and *visioning*.

I

I like the verb form of tradition, traditioning, because tradition is a living thing. Paul uses the verb form in I Corinthians 15: “I handed on to you what I have received.” He is talking about the Easter tradition.

Tradition is a living thing because it is something always being passed down and as it is passed down, it is being interpreted and adapted to the needs and mission of the church for today. Sometimes we get a disease called *categorical-sclerosis*, the hardening of the categories!

Jesus had a lively relationship with tradition. He honored it and he criticized it. In his words before the Sermon on the Mount he said of scripture and tradition:

Do not think I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill (Matthew 5:17).

He was not a hater of tradition, but a reformer and renewer of tradition. So a few verses down in the Sermon on the Mount he *six times* said: “You have heard that it was said...but I say to you.” He was *traditioning*, honoring the law and the prophets but deepening their meaning. The commandment against murder was deepened to harboring anger in your heart; loving your neighbor and hating your enemies turned into loving everybody, even your enemies.

Later on in Matthew he takes on tradition and what it can do if wrongly used. The tradition-keepers came to him and asked, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat?” Jesus volleyed back his own question: “And why do you break the commandments of God for the sake of tradition?” No gentle Jesus meek and mild here!

A living tradition has both words and music. Sometimes we lose the tune. The tune is love. Jesus was the Great Improvisor of Tradition. He knew when to

stick to the words and when to deepen their meaning. And he always knew the tune.

The Jewish people when talking about scripture use two phrases: The Written Torah and the Oral Torah. The Written Torah is the written words of scripture. The Oral Torah is the expansion of the Torah through interpretation that keeps the Bible alive. So for us there is a Written Tradition which we recover from facts and documents and memories, and there is an Oral Tradition where we have kept adapting it over the years for today.

In the next months I hope we take the opportunity to celebrate our traditions, to remember the moments that captured our hearts, the moments when it was God at work, not just us at work. Those early months of dreaming and planning. Our first worship service, the early years in our cement block church. Our first service in this building with Wayne Rogers making the cross which we see every Sunday. Those Easter Sunrise services with breakfast, at first on our grounds then moving to Fifth Street. Fifty years of sharing communion.

I also hope we will mark the ways we have altered our traditions in order better to love God and neighbor. Our very forming was an altering of tradition as we sought to be a different kind of Baptist church. Today we are not just a different kind of *Baptist* church, we are a different kind of *church*, with members from many other denominations and faith traditions. Off the top of my head I

count seven: Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Catholic, Jewish and Pentecostal. So call us *Grace Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Catholic, Jewish, Pentecostal, Whosoever Will Baptist Church!*

II

Which brings me to the other vital dimension of being the church: visioning. When the Holy Spirit fell upon the new church at Pentecost, Peter said it was fulfillment of the prophet Joel:

It will be,
 in the last days, God declares,
 That I will pour out My Spirit
 upon all flesh;
 and your sons and your daughters
 shall prophesy
 and your young men shall
 see visions,
 and your old men shall dream dreams!

(Acts 2:17)

Girls and women too! Remarkably so.

Do you remember some of the original dreams and visions? And what about dreams and visions which have come since?

In the twentieth century a new kind of theology arose called the “Theology of Hope.” It said that God was not just “up there” in the heights, not just “down there” in the depths, God is coming to us from the future, coming with the New. This God comes with new dreams and visions.

Who are members here today who would not have been members fifty years ago? Who is preaching from our pulpit some Sundays today who would not have been fifty years ago? What are ways we serve this community that have expanded through these fifty years?

There is a passage I love from Isaiah 43. The Hebrew people are languishing in Babylonian captivity. They are worrying and despairing, and doing a little whining: ‘You acted for us in the past! Remember when you delivered us from slavery? Why aren’t you acting like that now?’ And God says:

Remember *not* the former things nor consider the things of old. Behold I am doing a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

(Isaiah 43: 18-19)

Remember not! There is a kind of remembering that is a form of faithfulness and a kind of remembering that is a form of unfaithfulness. We can be gripped in nostalgia, wanting to go back to the church of former years.

People all over are nervous about the future of the church in America. With good reason. Some dream of going back to the church of the 1950's, 60's, 70's, the "golden age" of the church. But those days are gone, never to return. God is doing a new thing! Let's look out for it!

Nostalgia can be a deadly thing. It can cause us to despise or devalue who we are now. It can close our eyes to the new! Peter Drucker the noted Harvard Business school professor has said:

Sometimes to repeat the successes of the past is worse than a failure.

We need Jesus and the Spirit to help us improvise on our tradition that we may more fully be who God needs us to be now. It will be a blending of the old and new. One day Jesus was talking to his disciples about how to be "scribes" for the kingdom of God, wise teachers of the kingdom which had come near in Jesus. He said it's like the head of the household who goes to the house treasury and brings out what is new and what is old. (Matthew 13:52). *What is new and what is old! Both.*

So this year let's go to the church's cupboard and take out what is old and what is new, so that we may love the old and give thanks for what is new. At the end of our celebration may we say with Dag Hammarskjold, the Secretary General of the U.N. in the 60's, a great leader and mystic:

For all that has been, thanks,

To all that shall be, Yes!