

Series: The Wesleyan Path
Sermon: Quadrilateral - Tradition

Hebrews 12:1-11

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

4 In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 5 And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says,

“My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,

6 because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”

7 Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? 8 If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. 9 Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! 10 They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. 11 No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

Sermon

This Thanksgiving, we are hosting the family gathering. Plane loads of Benischeks will descend upon PDX, and we’ll have a houseful of kith and kin to celebrate the Turkey feast. Hotel rooms are booked, plans are being made, and we asked the matriarch in the family some of the most difficult questions: What traditions are do we have to abide by, and which traditions are more, loopy-goosy - it’d be nice, but not absolutely necessary. Do we have to have ham as an optional side? Would Thanksgiving be ruined if we didn’t make sweet potatoes? What if we did a Thanksgiving lunch and not a dinner? Scandalous! We’ve never done it that way before! In the end, I think we’re going to be OK - luckily we’re not messing with Christmas - by golly, there are some traditions you don’t mess with with Christmas. In the end, the traditions are supposed to help us celebrate events with a connection to our heritage, our family, our past. We tell our kids when they ask why? Why do we do it like this? We tell them this is just what we do in our family. Can we celebrate your birthday without singing happy birthday? We could, but something would be missing. Can we celebrate the 4th without fireworks? We could, but something would be missing. Traditions ground us in a continuity of purpose, of intentionality, of reconnecting to annual symbolatry. However, traditions can also tie you up and chain you to a past that is no longer needed nor wanted. We always go to the coast on Memorial Day! Why not shake it up next year? We always get together with my family the Saturday before Christmas - its been going on for three generations - which means that we’re celebrating with 3rd and 4th cousins that we don’t know and only see at Christmas. Sounds great, but we’re giving up Christmas time with people closer to us. We will have turkey this

thanksgiving, although we can skip the sweet potatoes.

I find this tension with my wedding couples. The great thing about weddings are the traditions associated with weddings. The horrible thing about weddings are the traditions associated with weddings. I tell my wedding couples, only use those traditions that matter to you - skip the rest. We did something borrowed and blue thing, that's kind of fun. But we skipped the garter tradition - for whatever reason my wife didn't want her uncles to see me try to grab a garter. At the toast, I had a Pepsi - hard to believe right? But the DJ said, "You gotta have champagne or it's not a real toast." Our wedding, our rules. I had a bride call me up, I need a ring bearer. You have anyone at your church that could be a ring bearer? Are you asking me if I could hire out a 6-8 year old boy to be your ring bearer? Sounds too much like human trafficking. She said that the wedding book says she needs a ring bearer. For the love of God, you don't need a ring bearer. Once upon a time, someone getting married looked at two little kids and thoughts, hmmm, one could carry rings, another do the flowers. Traditions ground us in a continuity of purpose, of intentionality, of reconnecting by using symbolic rituals.

We are delving into the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. How Methodists do theology. We know God primarily through scripture, but also with tradition, experience and reason. My last sermon hit scripture, how the Spirit of Christ is our authority in interpreting the sacred text. Today, we take a look at tradition. What does our tradition say who we are, how we know God, and what God asks of us? This is beyond the little traditions that we do - week in, week out, year in year out, but its more about the longer scope of what has been church teaching and policy over two millennia.

Tradition is about history. It's about what has happened in the past. Both good and bad. Of course, the goal is to learn from the bad and we celebrate the good. It's sad to say that within the history of the church we've done some bad. We've had 2,000 years of blunders and mistakes along the way. The Spanish Inquisition comes to mind. Treatment of women, native populations, those outside the church, there are times when we've gone counter to the Spirit of Christ. Even within the Methodist church itself there is some bad. The early Methodist church supported the separation of whites and blacks even within the church itself. Richard Allen, first black deacon in the Methodist Church served in Philadelphia in the 1780's. He had purchased his own freedom driving salt wagons during the Revolutionary War. He helped build up St. Georges Methodist Church in Philly - bringing in more African Americans to the church. That was nice when it was just a few former slaves, but they began growing in number. So the white folk put in a balcony for the negros. Later on, they asked that they moved to the side of the church and stand. This is how the encyclopedia records what happened next: One day in November 1787 Absalom Jones, William White, and Allen came late to services at St. George's and were ushered into the new gallery. They went to seats above their accustomed places in the church. They were unaware that they were not allowed to sit in the new section of the church, which they and many other black members of the congregation had helped build. As the three men were on their knees in prayer, a trustee of the church grabbed Jones by the shoulder and attempted to drag him from his knees. Steven Klot's book Richard Allen: Religious Leader and Social Activist reported that Jones said, "wait until the prayer is over," but the trustee insisted that the black men leave immediately. Jones again said, "Wait until the prayer is over, and I will get up and trouble you no more." Another trustee was called and this provoked a general exodus by most of the black members of the church. Allen later said, "we all went out of the church in a body, and they were no more plagued by us in the church." That's something the Methodist church is not proud of and it's how the African Methodist Episcopal church or AME church began. Black people weren't happy so they started their own denomination. I don't blame them. We learned that ordaining women is a good thing. We were one of the first do to so. But we're not there yet. Some Methodist churches even today would rather not have a female pastor.

But for all of our dark spots, we've been a shining light in others. From starting hospitals to schools. Colleges to orphanages. Food kitchens to the rights of workers. We pushed for a minimum wage. We pushed for the 40 work week. We pushed for the end of child labor. We have a tradition of caring for the poor and destitute. For

the rights of others and minorities. For social justice and equality.

Wesley and the early Methodists were particularly concerned about inviting people to experience God's grace and to grow in their knowledge and love of God through disciplined Christian living. They placed primary emphasis on Christian living, on putting faith and love into action. This emphasis on what Wesley referred to as "practical divinity" has continued to be a hallmark of United Methodism today.

The distinctive shape of our theological heritage can be seen not only in this emphasis on Christian living, but also in Wesley's distinctive understanding of God's saving grace. Although Wesley shared with many other Christians a belief in salvation by grace, he combined them in a powerful way to create distinctive emphases for living the full Christian life.

In our tradition John Wesley believed in personal holiness and social justice. He believed that if you were a holy person, you would naturally be involved in making the world a better place. He coined the rules of life that as an ordained person I agreed to uphold: Do no harm, Do all the good you can and attend to the ordinances of God. Which means practice the spiritual disciplines of Bible reading, prayer, fasting, communion and attending worship services on a regular basis. Some of you would be surprised to know that one of our traditions is that at one time in the early 1800's we were known as "shouting Methodists." What we now call "Pentecostal churches" and "Charismatic churches" started at this time with the holiness movement of the Methodist Church. The services where people are shouting and dancing and laying prostrate on the ground, that was the Methodist church, that was us at one time. So if you want to talk about tradition, it doesn't just mean the hymns, it doesn't just mean saying the Lord's prayer every Sunday, let's talk about all the traditions. If you consider yourself a traditionalist then why aren't you shouting? That's part of the tradition of the Methodist church. When Wesley talked about the importance of tradition, he was talking about those things we can learn from and those things we should celebrate. Where did the Methodist church get this idea that worship had to be quiet and somber and rigid?

Now, there are some traditions that are steeped in historical struggle. One of those traditions is the Apostle's Creed. This statement of belief did not just happen on its own, it took years and years to develop and its earliest form was established in the 4th century. Wesley believed that the Apostle's Creed was an accurate statement of faith that we as Methodists, more importantly, we as Christians can share together. I know that some in here may be adverse to Creeds, but for the sake of tradition, let's say it together:

I Believe (SCREEN SHOT OF APOSTLES CREED)

We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. And we look at their witness as we examine our own lives. The author of Hebrews has just listed heroes of Bible and talked about how their faith allowed them to do incredible things. We have a history, a tradition of people who did incredible things because of their faith, we join the tradition of fixing our eyes on Jesus as well.

So what do we do with this? Why should we care? Our traditions show us who we've been, where we've come from. Throughout the centuries every generation looks at faith through the context of their own circumstances. We own up to our mistakes. We celebrate our triumphs. But we are reminded that we are part of a larger story that tells the story of Jesus in the here and now - to carry on both personal piety and social needs. If we only concentrate on our own salvation and not worry about the needs of the world, we lose a lot of our tradition. If we only worry about the needs of the world, and forget that Jesus Christ is Savior - we lose a lot of our tradition.

Whatever traditions we carry forward to the next generation, let us not dismiss our ancestors in the faith, but learn from them as we claim our own personal piety and social responsibility. Is it easy? No. The Christian

walk is hard. As Paul put it for us today, No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. Lets walk by faith, in the shadow of our forefathers and foremothers, living by the Spirit of Christ. And the family of God said, AMEN.