

“Traditionalists: Loving God with Our Ancestors”

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Third in a Series *Loving God Many Ways*

1st Corinthians 11:20-34

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When you get together in one place, it isn't to eat the Lord's meal. Each of you goes ahead and eats a private meal. One person goes hungry while another is drunk. Don't you have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you look down on God's churches and humiliate those who have nothing? What can I say to you? Will I praise you? No, I don't praise you in this.

I received a tradition from the Lord, which I also handed on to you: on the night on which he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread. After giving thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this to remember me." He did the same thing with the cup, after they had eaten, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Every time you drink it, do this to remember me."

Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you broadcast the death of the Lord until he comes. This is why those who eat the bread or drink the cup of the Lord inappropriately will be guilty of the Lord's body and blood. Each individual should test himself or herself, and eat from the bread and drink from the cup in that way.

For these reasons, my brothers and sisters, when you get together to eat, wait for each other. If some of you are hungry, they should eat at home so that getting together doesn't lead to judgment.

1st Corinthians 11.20-28,33-34a
Common English Bible

Traditions are like my basketball shoes.

When I first got these out of the box, they were clean, smelled new and looked great. I put them on, laced them up, and stormed the court. Shortly after, I winced. Then, limped. I checked out. Gingerly I slipped my new shoe off, slowly peeled off my sock. It was the size of a nickel. Blister!

But now, after breaking in, they feel right.

A tradition is like broken-in shoes. Traditions fit just right. So well, we don't usually think about them.

Traditions are like a toddler's bedtime. A toddler's life is crazy! Learning to walk, feed yourself, talk. Exciting, exhausting, adventurous, and scary. At day's end, you need routine. You need structure. You need predictability. Same stuffy. Same blanky. Same book. Same prayer. Same snuggle. Tradition!

II

We are celebrating different ways we love God. Gary Thomas calls these "Spiritual Pathways."¹ I've listed them in your Sunday News.

Caregivers
Traditionalists
Activists
Contemplatives
Ascetics
Enthusiasts
Intellectuals
Naturalists
Sensates

Each of us will be drawn to some pathways more than others. At the back of the sanctuary, you'll find copies of a short questionnaire that can help you clarify your pathways.

III

Today is about "Traditionalists." Traditions are practices handed to us, by those who have gone before us.

¹ Gary Thomas, Sacred Pathways: Discover Your Soul's Path to God revised edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010). I've changed the order Thomas presents them, to fit my planned order for this series.

Caregivers love God by caring for others.

Traditionalists love God with our ancestors.

Activists love God by confronting injustice.

Contemplatives love God through adoration.

Ascetics love God in solitude and simplicity.

Enthusiasts love God by engaging mystery and celebration.

Intellectuals love God with their minds.

Naturalists love God outdoors.

Sensates love God by engaging their senses.

G. K. Chesterton said this about tradition (I've changed it a bit.)

Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant rule of the few who merely happen to be walking about. All democrats object to people being disqualified by the accident of birth; tradition objects to their being disqualified by the accident of death. Democracy tells us not to neglect a good person's opinion, even if he is our stable hand; tradition asks us not to neglect a good person's opinion, even if he is our father.²

We can be conceited that our time and generation has things figured out best, simply because we are the ones who happen to be around now? Tradition means we don't have to make everything up from scratch. It lets us learn from those who have gone before us. Allow them to teach us, question us, inspire us, and even correct us.

Notice how today's Bible reading works. Paul is dealing with a community that was divisive and unjust. This centred on how they celebrated the Lord's Supper. Paul brings them back to what the Meal means. Paul was a very fresh and innovative thinker. Yet here, he insists that what he is saying is not new. He is handing over what he himself received. Tradition.³

IV

Let me talk about one type of tradition, rituals.⁴

Rituals are patterns we follow. We all have rituals, whether we write them down or not.

Here we follow a "Church Year," starting with Advent in a couple of weeks. This ritual helps

² Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1908). The citation is in chapter 4, which can be found here: www.ccel.org/ccel/chesterton/orthodoxy.vii.html. I have adapted it to make it clearer and more inclusive.

³ Later in the same letter, Paul does the same thing. He wants to remind people of the core of what they believe and trust, the Gospel-Good News of Jesus.

I passed on to you as most important what I also received: Christ died for our sins in line with the scriptures, he was buried, and he rose on the third day in line with the scriptures. He appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve, and then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at once—most of them are still alive to this day, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles . . . 1st Corinthians 15.3-7 (Common English Bible)

⁴ Another important tradition is our practice of saying creeds. These are short outlines of some basic things Christians believe. Later in the service, we said the Nicene Creed together. It dates from the early 4th century, and set some directions for how we think about the Trinity, including Jesus. It doesn't say everything. Some things in it might make us scratch our heads. Still, it is part of who we are, a treasure handed on to us, faithful wisdom from our ancestors.

shape how we tell the story of Jesus.

Our worship times follow a pattern. For us, it's a pattern of gathering, of hearing God's Word in Scripture, responding with prayer, offering and sacrament, and departing to be God's people in the world. Along the way, we have anchors:

One: God's grace and peace to you.

*All: **God's grace and peace to you.***

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name . . .

The blessing of God Almighty – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – be with you.

With these anchor points and within this pattern, we can have flexibility and creativity. Our ritual traditions don't need to stifle. They can help us be bold and innovative, without getting lost.

Another vital tradition is daily prayer. I've been using this book, *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*.⁵ It has a strong social justice and peacebuilding focus. Yet it is very traditional. Every day starts the same:

*Lord, let my soul rise to meet you,
as the day rises to meet the sun.*

Kathleen Norris, a writer and poet, wrote this:

I think I'm typical of a lot of people in my generation. I simply stopped going to church after high school. I really can't explain what it was that ten years later drew me back. Ironically, I think it was the Benedictines that kept me at it. I'm married. I'm not a Catholic. But when I started attending their liturgy, they would sing or recite psalms, have a Bible reading and some prayers four times a day. Being able to say and hear poems out loud was a whole new approach for me, even though it's about 1,700 years old. It really nourished me and made me a better Presbyterian.⁶

⁵ Shane Clairborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Enuma Okoro, Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

⁶ Quoted in Thomas, 80.

The Christian monastic tradition calls for seven prayer times through the day. My prayer book uses three: morning, noon, and evening. Our Muslim friends pray five times. Is that a tradition we could learn from them? How would that change our experience of God, every day?

V

Like any of the Spiritual Pathways, traditions have their dangers.

Worship rituals can help us experience God. But we can come to love them more than we love God. Our traditions can become gods, replacing the true and living God in our loyalty and adoration.

Following traditions does not replace following God. Listen to what God says through the prophet Amos:

*I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. . . . Take away from me the noise of your songs. . . . But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*⁷

We can become stuck in “We’ve always done it that way!” We forget why we started doing something a certain way. We don’t ask whether we should continue doing it that way.

Jaroslav Pelikan was a historian. He loved tradition. This is one of his more memorable comments:

*Tradition is the living faith of the dead,
traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.*⁸

Tradition gives life to our walk with God. It keeps us in a living conversation with our ancestors. Traditionalism supposes that nothing should ever be done for the first time. It keeps us from seeing the new things God is doing now. Being stuck to traditions kills our walk with God.⁹

⁷ Amos 5:21-24 (English Standard Version)

⁸ *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1984), 65.

⁹ In an interview, Pelikan expanded on his often-quoted lecture comment:

Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. Tradition lives in conversation with the past, while remembering where we are and when we are and that it is we who have to decide. Traditionalism supposes that nothing should ever be done for the first time, so all that is needed to solve any problem is to arrive at the supposedly unanimous testimony of this homogenized tradition.

U.S. News & World Report (June 26, 1989). Cited in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaroslav_Pelikan.

Remember what G. K. Chesterton said, about traditions giving a vote to those who have gone before us. Notice he said “vote,” not “veto.” Traditions give our ancestors a say in what we do now, but we need to listen too to the new things God is leading us to.

Traditions are the roots to a tree. Any tree, to keep growing healthy and strong, needs a deep and expansive root system. Roots keep it from toppling over in stormy winds. Still, the roots are there so the tree can grow. A tree is more than roots. It is new growth. Otherwise, it's just a stump.

VI

How does following traditions help us love God?

We don't love God alone. It's not “me and God,” but “we and God.” Even when I'm praying by myself, enjoying the presence of God by myself, I am part of a broad and expansive community of disciples. And the “we and God” is a community that stretches through time.

Traditions root us in that Christ-community and its story. We get to learn from others. Even if they have been gone a long, long time, their traditions help us to love God with them. Through the beliefs, practices and stories they have handed on, they bless us with their lived experience of loving God. They teach us to love God. As we will teach those who come after us, by what we hand on.

And in all things, God is loved. Amen.