

"Tradition! Our Living Ideas." Is. 65:17-25; Is. 12; 2Thess. 3:6-13
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
Rev. David E. Young
Consecration Sunday, November 18, 2007

One of the great Church historians of recent memory was Jaroslav Pelikan. He was a prolific writer and also had a way of turning a phrase that could catch a person's eye and mind. One time he was drawing a distinction between Tradition and Traditionalism. Here's what he said:

"Tradition is the living faith of dead people to which we must add our chapter while we have the gift of life. Traditionalism is the dead faith of living people who fear that if anything changes, the whole enterprise will crumble."

Today we celebrate our Christian Tradition, a living faith and a tradition that is resilient and vibrant, that comes to us as a gift and as a legacy to which we are adding chapters, day by day and year by year.

As early as the first century Paul talked about "traditions" that the Thessalonians had received either by word of mouth or by his letters. The letters are the way Paul communicated the content of the faith. First and foremost his letters will be based on the crucified and risen Christ. He will proclaim the forgiveness of sin and the reality of new life in Christ. He will focus on the grace of God and faith in him rather than on the works we think we can do to earn our way into heaven.

Part of the tradition Paul conveyed was the belief in the 2nd coming of Christ. This is still a foundation in our tradition. But what had happened in Thessalonica was that some had become so

enthused by the idea and so convinced that Jesus was returning soon that they decided to quit their jobs and just wait. Paul speaks out against the idleness of those who could work, but wouldn't .

Paul wants to correct such misunderstandings and he also gives the example of how he lives and works as a tentmaker so that he can support himself while he preaches and teaches the Gospel.

His words of caution are for those who are able-bodied and fully capable of working but choose not to for religious reasons. His words are not meant to be used as a way of limiting our compassion for others in need or for holding all people up to the same standard of industriousness and activity that most are.

Paul also gives them and us a tradition of gratitude and generosity and giving. He solicited financial support for the church in Jerusalem and it was the outpouring of support from churches he founded throughout the Mediterranean that went a long way toward cementing the ties between the church in Israel (that was largely a Jewish-based church) and the churches elsewhere that were largely non-Jewish in their converts and customs.

It is this tradition of gratitude and generosity that rises up on a day like today.

We have arrived at Consecration Sunday. This is the day when we have the opportunity to focus the thinking and the praying we have done about our giving into a tangible response to God. What is the measure of our thanks? How do we convert a feeling into a fact of our life together as a church?

Again and again, throughout the New Testament, the Apostle Paul - especially - makes the case for the importance of giving and not allowing our wealth or our poverty to get in the way of giving something back in a sacrificial way to God.

Sacrifice. It's a word we hear often and one we use often. Even the sports-minded hear the word sacrifice used to describe that high fly ball to the outfield that allows a runner to score. But in biblical terms, sacrifice is connected to God and to God's call to put our trust in him, first and foremost.

At its root, "sacrifice" comes from two words: "sacrum" meaning "holy", and "facere" meaning "to make" as in the word "manufacture" "to make by hand". To "sacrifice" is "to make holy".

We make something holy by setting it apart from common uses. We give something up that cannot be gotten back. In the Old Testament we are reminded again and again of the variety of sacrifices the people would make in response to the goodness of God. There are animal sacrifices and grain sacrifices. At one time Abraham is instructed to sacrifice his son Isaac as a sign of his faith in God.

Later, in the New Testament, the measure of sacrifice will be the death of Christ on the cross, dying that we might live. The Apostle Paul will talk to Christians in the churches he founded about how Christ, in an act of Grace and though he was rich, become poor so that through his poverty we might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9). This richness we have is the rich promise of eternal life.

When we offer up sacrificial gifts of our time and talent and our resources, when we give these things up to God in thanks and praise for the gifts we have received from God first, we are making something holy. We are offering something up that is no longer in our control.

But this is difficult!

Mahatma Gandhi was once approached by a family seeking his help in weaning their son off of his addiction to sugar. Gandhi promised to help.

Several weeks later the family returned to see what he had decided to do and how he would help them. He told them to come back later.

Several more weeks elapsed and the family returned, exasperated and annoyed that Gandhi hadn't done what he had promised.

With a somewhat sheepish look on his face Gandhi replied, "When I promised to help I didn't realize how hard it would be for me to give up sugar."

In a sense, all of us who preach need to practice what we preach. There are many things about how we practice stewardship and how we use our resources and our time that I feel least capable of commenting on because I know how poor a steward I am at times and how much I squander my resources and my time. I am the selfish one. I like "things". I like good food, good clothes, warmth, a roof over my head, spending money in my pocket. None of these things are bad. They are the result of working. I know the "getting" is good, but the "giving" is better still.

Even so, on a day like today I find myself crying out like the man who came to Jesus and said, "Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief!"

The good news is that God has provided each of us with all things and also with a way out of our self-condemnation for the gap between what we know we should and even could be doing and what we actually do. The way is called the way of Christ. The provision is called "the future". We are each given the opportunity to assess what we have done thus far and what we feel called to do in the future and for the future.

For some this call involves the call to tithe. The call to tithe is an Old Testament concept, but it still provides a lens through which to consider how we give, how we set aside and how we spend.

Proportional giving is perhaps a better way to approach it, especially when we are feeling as though there is a vast gap between what we do and what we would like to do. Stepping up our giving is a way to work toward a goal and feel as though we are making some progress toward it.

Statistics on giving point to an average of around 2.5% rather than the biblical standard of 10%. But even if we were all at the 10% mark, how would that create joy in us and not just a grudging wish that God didn't require so much?

Tithing is actually mentioned very little in the New Testament. What we have in its place is the God who sacrifices everything on the cross for the sake of our eternal life. What we have is the widow who, out of her poverty, puts 2 coins in the Temple treasury and that is the gift Jesus sees and comments upon and tells us is the greatest gift given. What we have in the New

Testament is the Pharisee who comes to prayer and beats his own drum, telling God about all the great things he's done, including tithing, while the Tax Collector can only beat his breast and mumble a prayer asking for God to be merciful to him and Jesus said that his prayer was the one God heard and he was the one who left the Temple justified rather than the puffed-up Pharisee.

So, I'm not sure how much emphasis we should place upon tithing, in and of itself. I would rather see us put the emphasis on giving as a response of love and gratitude to God. To make the transition from viewing giving as a duty we owe to seeing it as a delight that we have the privilege of participating in God's grand plan for salvation and the bringing together of all God's people.

Here at Chapel Lane we are in the process of making this transition. It is a movement toward a deeper level of generosity based on a deeper understanding of how God has blessed us. It is based in part on a greater awareness of how our ministries here at Chapel Lane impact us and the community around us.

To help us with this question we have had presentations from each of our boards - we have 6 of them and each is responsible for different aspects of our ministry. The emphasis this year has been on how lives are changed and needs are met because of the ministries you support with your giving.

We have tried to emphasize the importance of generosity and gratitude as ways to stand in opposition to our culture that believes gathering and hoarding are the cultural values and norms we should foster.

But how do we create generous souls and a tradition of generosity? This was a concern for Paul as well as for us. He wanted the Thessalonians and the Corinthians, the Philippians and the Colossians - followers of Christ everywhere - to look beyond themselves to the God who had caused their hearts to turn toward the cross and to the awesome sacrifice of God for their souls. Paul wanted those who had received much to freely give so that others might survive.

How do we make our duty our delight? Our duty is to support the work of Christ in this place with our generous gifts of our finances, our time and our abilities. The delight comes when we see the way in which being a generous person affects not only the recipients of our generosity, but also us ourselves.

This text from 2nd Thessalonians focuses most of its attention on Paul's efforts to instruct the church members that simply checking out and waiting for Christ's return is not a reasonable way to be in community with one another. In later years, Martin Luther would be asked what he would do if he knew that Jesus was coming back tomorrow. His response: "I'd plant a tree."

Our waiting is not idle waiting. It is waiting built upon working so that the message of the gospel can continue on its path into the hearts and lives of all people. We give of ourselves because of the gifts we have received. We give back because the first gift, the gift of life, came to us from God and the second gift, the gift of new life, came to us from God through Jesus Christ.

What are the traditions of Chapel Lane that we want to see continue beyond us? We have a history and a tradition of mission giving and mission going. We have a tradition of hospitality and openness to others that is not always found in churches. We have

a tradition of not taking ourselves too seriously but taking our God very seriously. We have a tradition of lay leadership and involvement that was a hallmark of this congregation.

We have done amazing things as we have combined our efforts in outreach and in building up the church. We have invited many through our doors and shared the love of God for them as they have needed the basics of life and a sense of hope that they were not forgotten or alone.

Our traditions: these are our living ideas, the living faith that is built upon the faith of those who have gone before us. They knew there would be more to do after they had gone. We too know there will be more to do as we in turn pass the torch to others.

While it is in our hands, how can we enable it to burn brighter? How can we allow the love of God to burn in our hearts and kindle a desire to return greater thanks to the maker of all?

Is this the year that we will shift the balance from giving out of a sense of duty to giving because of the delight we have in our hearts? Is this the year that our joy in the Lord overflows to the point that we are almost giddy with the thought that we can respond to the gift of salvation - freedom and forgiveness! - with gifts that set others free from poverty, starvation, despair and a sense that no one cares whether they live or die?

Is this the year that we decide to do more, even a little more, than we have done in the past?

Is this the year that the idea of sacrifice, of making something holy, extends to our use of our time and our talents and not just our tithes?

We have a Christian Education department and a Christian Education Director who would love to be challenged to find enough space and enough teachers to lead education for all ages, especially adults.

We would love to have to have a waiting list because we cannot accommodate all who want to go on a mission trip.

We would love to run out of jobs to give volunteers for the days when we invest in the cleaning and upkeep of our building.

And, yes, we would love to never have to turn away a person in need because the funding just isn't there.

In short, we would love to be the church of Jesus Christ that is more vibrant, more alive, more in tune with its rich traditions and more ready and able to respond and reach out to others because of the way in which God has first reached out to us and opened our hearts to the love that knows no bounds.

Can this be that year?

Let us pray: Open the eyes of our hearts, Lord. Help us to see you at work in and through us. Create a desire in us to be filled with such delight in our salvation that our service to others and our giving might know bounds. Start that tradition in us and help us to come alive in our faith. Amen.

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