

Psalm 36:5-10

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your judgements are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O Lord. How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light. O continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your salvation to the upright of heart!

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Let Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

“When Tradition is Treacherous”

Rev. Charles Schuster

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It was in a court in Kentucky where the judge asked, "Colonel Buford, according to my record, Colonel Buford, you never served in a day in the army. Can you tell me how you come to be called Colonel?" The witness replied, "Well, Judge, it's like the word "honorable" in front of your name. It doesn't mean a thing." I'll get back to that.

At the airport, holiday season, mistletoe hanging from the baggage counter, a passenger asked the ticket agent, "Why is mistletoe at the place where I put my suitcase?" and she answered, "So you can kiss your luggage goodbye." Today the subject is tradition, and we find ourselves placed between an attitude that says it doesn't mean a thing, and an attitude that says, "Is it our luggage, and should be kiss it goodbye? And if we lose it, what does that mean?"

For John Wesley, tradition was one of the most important resources of faith, and today we begin a four-week series on United Methodists and what do we think? Or how? You see, we don't have a creed. Well, we said the Apostles' Creed. It doesn't mean that we... we don't say the creed to the church. But there isn't just one creed that we say every week. We base our decisions and our beliefs on tradition and reason and experience and

scripture. They're all there on the front of your bulletin. That's what's called the Quadrilateral, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. And today, we look at tradition. Scripture itself supports the value of tradition. If you think about it, the Psalmist speaking, how our soul waits for God, how God is a rock, how God is a fortress to us. There is a firmness about tradition. It's a rock. It's what we count on. There's a pattern to life. It's handed down to us. If tradition is a valuable thing to us, then it helps us remember that it didn't begin with us. It didn't begin with us. It's helpful to know that it didn't begin with us, and it's helpful to know that there are some things that should be. It makes it easier to just do what we do, if we know that that's what they've done. Tradition. Of course there are differences on how people think things should be done, conflicting traditions, and when that happens, we have to work things out. Part of what I think will happen on Tuesday, at the Charge Conference. We have to work things out.

Last Sunday afternoon, I had a funeral in Loveland at the mortuary there in Loveland. William Hassler died. I did his service. I'm in the chapel, and the Masonic Lodge is in a heated discussion with the military honor guard concerning who gets to go last. The Masons wanted their beautiful benediction over the casket to be last. It's tradition. The honor guard wanted to fire their rifles and have their trumpeter playing "Taps" to be the final thing. It's the way it always ends. In the middle of trying to work that out, one of the men looked at me and said, "Who are you?" and I said, "I'm the preacher." One of the other men said, "How long will you take for the sermon?" And I said, "Two hours and forty-five minutes." One of the members of the military looked at me and said, "Well, Reverend, when you see me in the back of the sanctuary with my M1 rifle you might want to bring that sermon to a close." The Masonic Lodge did their benediction. The honor guard fired their guns. The trumpeter played "Taps." The whole service lasted about forty-six and a half minutes. It was tradition, and yes, the sermon was short.

It didn't begin with us. Our soul waits for God. God is our rock and our fortress. It comes to us. We have had several funerals recently. Unfortunately, we've had seven in the last couple of weeks. Last Saturday, I had the privilege of meeting someone who has been a hero of mine for years. Her name is Katherine Kobe. She's a relative of Burdette Woodward, and she and I, Richard Brack and Karen Stoodly, we put the service together. Katherine worked in Foreign Service for the United States Government in Iran. She was taken hostage. She was put in prison for four hundred and forty-four days. She was one of two women who were held hostage. Many of us remember when Ronald Reagan was being sworn in as President, remember how the newscaster interrupted by saying that the hostages from Iran had been released, and Katherine was one of them. She said to me, over and over again, as we were with each other most of the afternoon, she said, "Traditions mean so much to me," she said. "The music, the ritual. Tradition, it means so much to me." She spoke of missing that as she was in prison. She kept thinking about the traditions of her faith.

While we were driving back to the church, having been at the cemetery, and the Masonic ritual was there, and the honor guard was there, and the old songs that she had heard, the ones Richard sang, and had all of us sing toward the end of the service. She said to me, "This is a beautiful church." She said, "I've been here before, you know." She wrote a

book. The book is entitled *Guest of the Revolution*. There are a couple of copies in the library here. It's a chronicle of the value of her religious tradition as a Lutheran, and her experiences in Iran. I asked her if she's planning to write another book, and she said "As a matter of fact I am, and the title of the next book will be *Gift of the Revolution*." She goes on to say, "Because my experience there helped me learn to cherish what I have received." She values tradition. She said, "It changed my life," and it did. It did. She is what she is because of that.

Harold Kushner is most remembered for his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, but one of his lesser-known books is a book he wrote entitled *Who Needs God?* In the introduction of that book he tells us, "I wrote this book because I had to. I love the religious tradition out of which I came, and I love the members of the congregation I serve, and my biggest disappointment in my ministry has been my inability to get my two loves to find each other and to love each other. I deal with bright and successful people, people that I genuinely admire and respect and like, and I sense with them that there's something missing in their lives. There's a lack of rootedness, a sense of having to figure out by themselves because the past cannot be trusted as a guide." And then he tells a story. "A man got a telegram telling him that a relative had died and left him with a valuable property, but that he was to go to the rabbi in the local temple and get the details. Excited, he went to the rabbi only to be told that the relative was Moses and the valuable property was religious tradition." Rabbi Kushner goes on to say, "Much of the time, when I tell that story to the people in my congregation, they react the same as the man in the story, disappointed that their legacy was religious wisdom and not downtown real estate."

It doesn't begin with us. It began before we were born. It is our rock, it is our foundation. It is valuable. Wesley called it prevenient grace. John, the writer of the Gospel, he called it the *logos*. It was before the world was. Tradition comes to us, and it is precious. It didn't start with us. We received it. But there's a second thing about tradition. It didn't start with us, but it doesn't end with those people who started it. Secondly, we have to take it and make it fit. Will Stryker tells about his uncle Herman from Vermont, who made an order to his butcher in Boston, and he began the order with a note: "Kindly send two geese." That didn't seem right, so he tore that note up and he started again. "Kindly send me two geeses." But he wasn't satisfied, so he tore that note up, and then he settled the problem, and he wrote, "Kindly send me a goose," and then he signed his name, and then he added, "P.S. Send me another one with it."

We have to modify our tradition to make it ours. David Larsen was right when he said, "Don't put live chicks under a dead hen." You can't keep things as they were and expect them to help with things as they change. Tradition is treacherous if it's kept and not applied or modified to fit. Last Sunday I was asked to drive the church van, to pick up residents from area retirement centers, and when we pulled into our first stop, one of the members of our church looked up at me, realizing his preacher in the pulpit was now the van driver in the cockpit, and he looked at me and he said, "You have got to be kidding!" After we got him back to his place, after the service, he said he thought the van was superbly driven. He took what he expected and made it fit with what he experienced.

The most dangerous thing about tradition is that we never make it ours. It becomes habit. It becomes empty or dead, and we continue to do it, not knowing why. Tradition doesn't end with those who made it. We have to take it and we have to make it ours. It comes to us, and I'm sure you noticed the two hymns we sang, the same hymn, Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote his hymn in 1930, it was the opening of the Riverside Church. It's the same hymn. And then Gerald Kennedy took that same hymn, the same tune, and rewrote the words thirty years later, Gerald Kennedy, a bishop in the United Methodist Church. We take it and make it ours.

Paul is suggesting that. He speaks of the one spirit. Some take it and are preachers, and some are healers, and some are miracle workers, and some are prophets, but it's all from the same spirit, and each of us use it, what we have, and live it in our age. It's the way it is right for us. How many times do we hear Jesus say, "You have heard it said, but I say to you..." He's doing it. We take tradition and we make it fit, we make it ours.

Third thing. It didn't start with us, and it doesn't end with them. Finally, we've got to pass it on. We've got to let it go. This weekend we remember the Movement and the man, Martin Luther King. Carlotta Wells LaNier, she remembers him well. Fourteen years old she was. She wanted to be a medical doctor. The high school in her neighborhood would have been perfect, a great high school. She wanted to go there. So she signed up, she enrolled, and that was the problem. It was Arkansas, it was Little Rock. It was a white Caucasian school, and Carlotta was African-American, and she is part of history, known as part of what's called the Little Rock Nine. Remember the hardships, the persecution, the people yelling at those high school kids back then. You remember that, some of you. She met Dr. King when he was young and she was young, it was before he was famous. She met him at a barbecue. She said, "It just does something to you to have met him on that stage, at that time in his life. It gives us fewer excuses to encourage to continue to do his work. Stepping up doesn't always require a giant step, but a courageous one. You do what you can for those who will come after. You take what you get, you make it yours, and then you pass it on.

Today you heard the announcement of the Golden Opportunity grants. The church has this anonymous donor who has provided \$65,000 to be used for the good of the church and the people and the mission and ministry of the church, and you heard the results. A summer internship for a CSU student who gets to work with the clergy. Scholarships. Help for the homeless. The agricultural project in Kenya. The Wesley Foundation. The school, Putnam school, this school with limited resources, and so on. The donor said to me about a week and a half ago, he said, "Do you now why I do this? It may not be why you think I do it." He went on to say, "Most churches, they do pretty well, they have worship and they have funerals and they have weddings, and that's great." And then he said, "But the leaders of this church, they are competent and they have ideas and they know good things to do, things that make a difference. I give my money because this is the best way I know I can do something for the good of that which is beyond my life."

There comes a time in our lives, when our whole focus in life is given to those who come after us. We take what we make of life, but we set it up, we pass it on, we pay it forward. Carl Jung called this stage of life "generativity." It's what we do after we accumulate, then we decide ways in which to distribute. It's in the spirit of John the Baptist. You remember how he said, "There is one who comes after me, who was before me. There is one I'm not even worthy to carry his shoes. I am not the light, I just bear witness to the light," he said. "I baptize with water. He baptizes with the Holy Spirit." It's all about passing it on. It's all about letting it go. It's all about what comes after us.

We're all thinking about Haiti and the earthquake, and the people who are in such need of help. I just don't see how a theologian like Pat Robertson can even begin to think it, and then to say it so other people will hear it, that the earthquake is somehow God's judgment on the nation of Haiti. He's got to be wrong about that, and he's got to know that. God is in the relief effort. Our own Jim Gulley, from our Rocky Mountain Conference, pastor in our conference... he'll be here in ten days, he'll be telling you about the experience. Trapped with four others in a six-foot by eight-foot space, totally dark and dusty. The reason that building didn't smash down on them was because there was a desk, and it collapsed in three seconds. Absolutely still. Completely silent, totally dark. Fifty-five hours. Rescued by French firefighters who, when they found them, said, "We are here to take you out." And it took them four hours to get them out. Jim will never forget it.

You know, whatever our problems are, whatever issues we might have, whatever concerns, it's not about us. We are born, we discover our gifts, we use them, we are rewarded, but it's not about us. It's not about our church. It's not about our flags. It's about what we pass on, and this tragedy, like all of them, it's not a test from God. God didn't do this, but God is waiting to see if we will do the right thing. God will work with us, God will empower us, God will give us the courage to face the future, whatever that future is, as we pass it on, as we look around, as we begin to think about our children, as we begin to think about our grandchildren, our great-grandchildren, those unborn, and their world.

Those words from Martin Luther King, and I paraphrase, just before his death, saying, in effect, "I've seen the promised land, but I won't be there with you. But there will be a day when a person will be judged by the content of their character, not the color of their skin." Annie Dillard, one of my favorite writers, grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She was six years old. She loved to do this. She would take a penny and she would find a street and she would hide it somewhere on the street. She'd put it under a sycamore root or in a crack in the sidewalk, then she'd go down to the end of the block and she'd write on the sidewalk with chalk, "Surprise ahead! Money this way" with arrows pointing. And then she'd just leave. She had no desire to see it, but just loved to think about the idea, the wonder of someone in the universe receiving a free gift from her. She passed it on. Tradition. That's what we're called to do, as we let it go.

"Colonel Buford, according to the record, you never served a day in the Army. Can you explain how you've come to be called Colonel?" "Well Judge, to tell the truth, it doesn't mean a thing." Tradition. Part of the quadrilateral. It's a resource of faith for us Methodists. It means there's a history of freedom of faith for us. It means that we think

and let think, for us it's tradition. We're not all alike, and that didn't begin with us, and it doesn't end with those who began it, and it means we pass it on, because tradition, unless we take it, unless we make it ours, unless we pass it on, it doesn't mean a thing.