

Tradition and the Family

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 3rd Sunday after Epiphany, January 22, 1989. Scripture Lessons: Nehemiah 8:1-4a, 8-10; 1 Corinthians 12:12-30; Luke 4:14-21; Psalm 19:7-14.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Several months ago Kay and I went with some neighbors to the Dutch Apple in Lancaster to see the play, *Fiddler on the Roof*. The entire play centers around the importance of tradition for a culture and people. Tradition gives a sense of identity, purpose and meaning. Tradition can bring an entire nation together as when last Friday our nation gathered around television sets to witness the orderly and peaceful transition of presidential power, a tradition that goes back two hundred years. Traditions also bring families together long after children have grown up and moved away. Children come home for Thanksgiving and Christmas when they can. Tradition gives us a sense of purpose and identity in good times and bad.

In the family, traditions help a child know that his or her home is special. Traditions assure us that we belong. All of ^{us} share a need to belong. We need to know that we're not just a bunch of isolated individuals but that we're members of families. Traditions also help to provide stability as our children grow. Someone has said that traditions are "threads from which our most valued memories are woven- the customs and practices which call us aside from ordinary routines to focus on someone or something precious to us." One of my fondest memories involves a tradition in my own immediate family. When I was a little boy my mother, father and I would gather around the radio on Sunday night and listen and laugh at the Edgar Bergen and Charley McCarthy show. It was a weekly tradition that brought my family together for a half hour of shared laughter.

By far the most important tradition we can establish for our families ^{is} ~~the~~ the sense of identity that flows out of participation in the Body of Christ, the church. I couldn't possibly tell you who I am today without speaking of values, attitudes, and experiences that have been communicated to me through the Sunday School and Church it was my custom to attend with my mother when I was a little boy. Though I couldn't understand much of what was going on at the time I was surrounded by a family of believers, became familiar with hymns and prayers and passages of Scripture. Because of that, today I ^{tradition} know I belong to the family of God. If I were to move away, if I were to lose my biological family... I'd still have a family of faith. I'd know that I belong.

If you're a parent of small children, the day will come, all too soon, when your children will grow up and move away-- perhaps far away. But if it's been their custom ^{from their earliest age} to come with you regularly to Sunday School and Church they'll ^{very probably} be able to look back ^{one day} with gratitude on the hours they spent here with you. They'll find strength and courage in the memory of these hours. And, more importantly, they'll know who they are. They'll be nurtured with a tremendous sense of identity that grows out of knowing Jesus Christ. They'll become aware that they're a personal creation of God. They'll know that God molded them and made them in their mother's womb, that Jesus has a plan for their lives, that He died for them, and that Jesus would have died for them if they were the only human beings on earth.

Talk about self-worth and a sense of purpose of life-- there's no greater sense of worth than that which comes from these spiritual values! I find that there's no enduring sense of self esteem in life apart from the message of Jesus in which I've been nurtured from the time I was a little child.

Our Gospel lesson tells us that Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, "as his custom" was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day. It was part of his family's tradition that he went to the synagogue week after week with his mother and Joseph. When Jesus came back to Nazareth after his temptation in the wilderness he didn't take the day off to get over it, or take a walk alone to ponder it. "He went into the synagogue, as his custom was, on the Sabbath day." *Jesus knew that's where he belonged on the Sabbath, usually*

Now, the synagogue wasn't *usually* much fun. It would be a building without music or art. The service would consist of the recitation of a prayer, a reading of the Law and a reading from the Prophets, with a sermon and then a Benediction or Blessing. In Nazareth, a poor little village, it's unlikely that there'd be anything very thrilling or very moving in the weekly worship service. Yet, week after week, the Son of God was present and sat and worshipped with the restless children, with the ~~steeple~~ *business people* farmers and fishermen, with the tired mothers and the giggling boys and girls-- praying with the ignorant and sinful people he knew so well. He identified with those needy, sorrowing, sinning people among whom he lived. Week after week Jesus attended that little synagogue in Nazareth hallowed by the prayers of many generations. And he found there a strength and a refreshing he could find nowhere else.

I know that our worship services are not always thrilling and moving to everybody present. Sometimes we come and the sermon, Scripture, hymns and anthems have nothing to say to us. Sometimes you may come with a heavy load of care and sorrow hoping that your *particular* need will be addressed. You may come because of a crisis in your life and you come hoping for the answer. You come for healing but you go away disappointed. Your need wasn't met. Healing didn't take place. I know this happens. But I believe

that if it's our custom to go to Sunday School and church ^{week after week on a consistent & regular basis} we'll have the best opportunity to have our spiritual needs met ^{over a period of time.}

One of my favorite preachers is David H.C. Read, Minister of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. His most recent book is entitled, *Preaching about the Needs of Real People*. Read is convinced that in a time of individualism the problems a worshiper brings to church are probably best met through the experience of regular worship and a deepening involvement in the life of the body of Christ. When we come to church sporadically for a quick fix we're often going to be disappointed. But if it's your custom to come week after week you're far more likely to find the help and strength and courage you need.

So "Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day." You might think that Jesus didn't need to go to church because he knew more than any rabbi could teach him, but in this he identified himself with his brothers and sisters. He was often in the Temple. He attended all the religious festivals in Jerusalem, a tradition he inherited from Mary and Joseph. If he needed the fellowship of God's people, we need it more. If he submitted himself to a regular spiritual discipline, his followers will do no less. In this he left us an example that we will follow in his steps.

Finally, it's still the custom of Jesus to go to church on the Lord's Day. He's promised that wherever two or three are gathered in his name that he'll be present. We're gathered together in his name this morning and *he is here*. He keeps up the tradition that was formed when he was a little boy by going to the public worship, walking between Mary and Joseph holding each by the hand. As his custom was, and is, he's here in our place of worship.

It won't matter what other people we meet here, nor what else is said or sung, if we know that that's true. If he is here- and he has promised to be- it won't be in dreary compliance with a duty but in eager expectation

of blessing that we shall be here, Sunday by Sunday. *It's still the custom of Jesus to attend worship. May you meet him here this morning & recognize his presence.*

Let us pray: Holy God, you call us to worship, and by your Spirit prompt prayers and praise. Keep us from saying words or singing hymns with ritual disinterest. Fill us with such wonder that we may worship you, Sunday after Sunday with your people, and daily in our families, grateful the mystery of your unfailing love for us, in Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.

Sources:

- The Princeton Seminary Bulletin, Volume IX, Number 3 New Series 1988
- The Expository Times, September 1976, p. 368 ff.
- The Expository Times, September 1980, p. 374 ff.
- The Christian Family Growing Together: Your Newspaper for Christian Home Building, Winter, 1982-83
- "The Importance of Family Traditions", by James Dobson in Our Home, undated.