

**THE IMPORTANCE (AND DANGER) OF TRADITION!  
REFORMATION SUNDAY**

(10/28/18)

Scripture Lessons:   Matthew 15:1-6  
                          1 Corinthians 11:1-2  
                          2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

“So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.” (2 Thess. 2:15)

“So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God.” (Mt. 15:6)

This coming Tuesday is the 501st anniversary of the event that has come to symbolize the spirit of the Protestant Reformation--Martin Luther nailing his ninety-five theses to the door of the cathedral at Wittenberg in 1517. The Reformation is an important part of our history, our heritage, and our identity as Protestant Christians. The theses which Luther hoped to debate with his church, the church that he loved because Luther, as you know, was an Augustinian monk, speak to the heart of the Christian faith and the nature of the institutional church not only in Luther's time but also in our time.

As you know, there are three branches of the Christian church: Roman, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant. Although our history and organizational structure are different, we hold many beliefs in common. There are, however, several beliefs and practices that distinguish us as Protestants, that shape not only our tradition but also our identity.

First and foremost, Protestants ground their understanding of God and Jesus in the Bible. Some Protestants believe the Bible is the inerrant Word of God. Others, including me, believe that the Bible is not the Word of God but contains the record of people's experiences of God within our Judeo-Christian tradition. It is our unique heritage, our legacy. We are especially blessed to have a record of the experiences of those who walked with Jesus, listened to his words, and experienced his healing, transforming presence.

The Bible is the foundation for our faith. We believe that God, as the Holy Spirit, dwells within us and within the church, to help us interpret or understand the Bible. Bible study is an important part of spiritual growth for a Christian. It would be strange to say that we are Christian, especially if we are Protestant, but we never read the Bible.

The Protestant reformers believed that the Bible should be available in a language that the common people could understand. The Old Testament, which was written in Hebrew, was later translated into Greek, the language of the New Testament. Jerome's translation of the Bible into Latin was called the Vulgate, meaning "common," because Latin was the language that was common across many cultures at that time.

By Luther's time, however, Latin was no longer used by the common people. They could not understand what was being said in the church services. The reformers began to translate the Bible into languages the common people could understand. Martin Luther translated it into German. John Wyclif translated it into English over a hundred years before Columbus sailed to America. Think of it—this was a major undertaking to translate the entire Bible by hand!

The ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church was not happy about making the Bible readable and available to everyone. When it was in Latin, they alone could read it. They alone could tell people what the Bible said and what it meant. This gave them a good deal of power. The practice of keeping the Bible in a language that only they could read established the church as the sole intermediary between people and God.

The Protestant reformers Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, Philip Melancton, and John Wesley took the church out of its position as gatekeeper between people and God. They emphasized the importance of our personal relationship with God. They believed we should all be able to read the Bible and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, decide what it was saying to us and to our time.

We may forget that there was a time when it was forbidden to read the Bible. Some people paid a heavy price to get this book into our hands. In 1525, William Tyndale gave us the first printed New Testament in English. The ecclesiastical hierarchy was so threatened by his actions that he was driven from England, hunted from place to place, and finally both strangled and burned in Belgium. Just for translating the Bible into words that people could understand!

Second, Protestants believe the central message of the gospel. The gospel is the good news about God, about humanity, about sin, about life, and about life after death. The good news about God is that God is love! The good news about humanity is that we are all children of God, that we are all made in the image of God—all of us! The good news about sin is that sin, the times when we are off-center in our life, can be forgiven. The good news about life is that

Christ shows us how to live life abundantly, opening the door to eternity through his life, death, and resurrection!

Third, Protestants believe in the importance of the church. They believe that the church was founded by Jesus Christ, who is its head. The church is his body. Christ carries out his healing, comforting, reconciling work in the world through the church. The church is not primarily an institution; it is a community, a society of believers that gathers in the name and spirit of Christ. The church is the people of God. This is why our church polity is democratic in structure.

Finally, Protestants believe in freedom of worship. Every Christian has direct access to God through Christ. We believe in what Martin Luther called “the priesthood of all believers.” Each believer can approach God directly. No particular place and no special form of worship is required. We understand the role of the minister differently from traditions that see the priest as the gatekeeper between people and God. We see the minister as a pastor, a shepherd, a teacher, and a guide, as a resource to us in our spiritual journey. Each Christian must be free to worship God as he or she desires. This is why we have different denominations.

This is also why each church, at least in our tradition, the free church tradition with its roots in Congregationalism, is responsible for its order of worship. The order of worship in our church is established by the Diaconate, the lay leaders who are responsible for overseeing the spiritual life of our church. They do so in consultation with the minister. Our order of service can change; it can evolve. The Diaconate and I seek to make worship meaningful for you. We want everything in our worship service to help you worship, to help you pray, to help you deepen your understanding of and your relationship with God through Christ.

This is our Reformation heritage. It is a heritage which I affirm. I cannot imagine belonging to, let alone serving as a minister in a church which did not believe in these fundamental tenets. In our church we do not tell you what you must believe; we try to give you the resources you need to shape and strengthen your own faith. We also believe that you must make decisions with regard to matters of morality based on your individual conscience.

We live in an iconoclastic age, a time when tradition is not honored. The “buzz word” even in the church is “contemporary.” We want our church to be contemporary. We do not want

to be known as traditional. This is what makes Tevya's lament so plaintive when, in the musical "Fiddler on the Roof," he mourns the loss of tradition.

I would like to go on record this morning as affirming our identity as a church which is not only steeped in its tradition, but a church which is traditional in its worship. I have attended worship in churches that pride themselves on being contemporary. When I attend these services, I usually come away empty. Their songs do not hold a candle to hymns like "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," the words of which were written by Martin Luther, and "For All the Saints." Modern services with guitars, amplifiers, and multi-media presentations may appeal to our attention-deficit-disordered youth, but I wonder whether what we are giving them is of substance, whether it will take them through the dark places in their lives.

I have no apologies that the worship in our church is traditional. It is not that we are opposed or resistant to change; but we are proud of our heritage, our tradition. The burden of proof is on those who advocate change to demonstrate that the new way, the contemporary forms, will do a better job of leading our people in their worship.

A sign by the door of the Winchester cathedral in England says, "You are entering a conversation that began long before you were born and will continue long after you are dead." On Reformation Sunday, we affirm this conversation, this ongoing conversation with God and with our history, our tradition as Christians, as Protestants, and as members of a church which has been on this spot for the past 153 years.

We need to live in the present. The Buddhists remind us that we need to "be here now." Alcoholics Anonymous reminds us to live "one day at a time." One of my favorite songs from the musical Rent is "No Day but Today."

However, we did not spring into being *ex nihilo*, spontaneously, out of nothing. We have a history as individuals and as a church. We have a tradition. Our tradition is a resource to us, or it can be if we honor it and learn from it. It has shaped and given rise to our present identity. As the apostle Paul tells us, "So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter." (2 Thess. 2:15). Jesus knew the importance of tradition, but he also warns us not to make a god of tradition, not to become so stuck in the observance of our tradition that we fail to evolve, that we fail to be open

to the guiding hand of God in the Holy Spirit. He tells the Pharisees, “So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God.” (Mt. 15:6)

We need to affirm our tradition, but we need to remember that God is not finished! God has not finished his creation of the world, the church, our little church, and also of us. If we listen to our tradition but do not listen to God, we are violating a fundamental tenet of the Protestant Reformation: we are making someone or something God who is not God.

Today, on Reformation Sunday, we give thanks for the saints who have gone before us, those ordinary, everyday people who became extraordinary, who gave us our Bible, our traditions as Protestants, our church, and who speak to us today. We affirm our need to be grounded in our tradition, our history, our story. This may help us to be faithful to the tasks of the present. It may also help us be imaginative and open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the creation of a future both for ourselves and for our church.

A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
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