

## **“A Long Conversation”**

**Yogi Berra said, "A nickel isn't worth a dime anymore."  
Following a similar line of logic, I've concluded that, "Tradition isn't what it used to be." My quote probably isn't original, but this morning I'll claim it because I want to put in a good word for tradition.**

**The anthropologist Margaret Mead said that we are a society of "neophiles," or, lovers of the new. We associate new with "improved." New versions render the old ones obsolete whether it is cars, blenders, deodorant, or organizational structures. New insights and discoveries trump traditional understanding. At universities there are far more technology majors than history majors. Time-honored traditions are dismissed as out of touch with realities of the present. Tradition isn't what it used to be. Society is oriented upward and onward-- not backward. But dismissing tradition comes at a cost.**

**I was on a fishing trip up north when a big storm hit. Boats were racing back to the resort, barely ahead of the storm. We got in just as it hit. Winds clocked at eighty miles per hour toppled large trees and took roofs off of cabins. After the storm passed we went to the docks and found some of the boats on the bottom. The rest were gone! The boats that had been tied too close to the pier couldn't pitch with the waves, which swamped the gunnels, filling the boats until they sank. Others were not tethered securely. As the waves pounded, the ropes pulled loose and they were literally, "gone with the wind."**

**If we cling too tightly to tradition and cannot adjust to changing circumstances, we're sunk. But we cannot be loosely connected to moorings of our traditions, either, or we will find ourselves**

**adrift without a map or compass, and blown here and there by the winds of change.**

**Our knowledge of God, Jesus, and the workings of the Holy Spirit; our faith and belief; and our ability to distinguish right from wrong isn't something we cooked up in the basement laboratory. It was given to us. Our faith has been handed down, generation to generation going back 3,500 years.**

**At the Winchester Cathedral in England there is a sign at the entrance that reads: "...you are entering a conversation that began long before you were born and will continue long after you're dead."**

**The burden is not upon us to find the secret path to the Kingdom of heaven. God has not thrown us overboard and said, "Sink or swim!" We are not talking to ourselves when we pray. Reading the Bible is not spiritual solitaire. We don't have to reinvent anything. We are part of the conversation that began in Eden. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Rachel joined in, then Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and John the Baptist, and then the Word became flesh and blood in Jesus who said, "I'm the Way, the Truth, and the Life."**

**On All Saints Day we remember generations of ordinary Christian saints-- who kept the conversation about Jesus going, and the traditions which make us disciples. Sainthood isn't an exalted status for the spiritual heroes of ancient history. Saints aren't otherworldly, but by the light of their lives we see another world.**

**Barrington Smith doesn't refer to the folks in his church as MEMBERS. He calls them, THE SAINTS. You don't always act like it, but you are saints, too. On All Saints Day we hallow the memory of those who passed on the traditions that have shaped and ordered our lives in this chaotic world. They relayed messages from the past. If we forget them-if we try to free ourselves from the past, we become slaves to the present.**

**What do you do when you are stressed? Take a hot bath and curl up on the couch with a book? Put on running shoes and pound the pavement for a couple of miles? Go to a quiet corner to shut out the world and meditate and pray? When I'm stressed, I cook COMFORT FOOD. I fix Grandma LeMay's fried mush, Aunt Grace's potato salad, and Grandma Bibbee's sauerkraut casserole.**

**The older I get, the better the food tastes. I don't cook these dishes just for the food. I cook because it brings to my memory the loved ones who made it for me years ago. For a little while, we're at the table together again. We have a discussion across time. I know it may sound a little weird. I just know that when I cook the family favorites, I feel better and feel that I am not alone.**

**Laurie read Luke's version of the Beatitudes. After, "Blessed are you..." comes a series of, "Woe are you...." Those who follow are called to a peculiar life. "Love your enemies. Bless those who curse you. Prayer for those who abuse you." Weird stuff-- and it is the legacy for those who follow Jesus. When the church was persecuted or came upon hard times, it held fast to its traditions. It pulled out the recipes!**

**Change usually isn't a welcome thing, is it? The changes that matter are never easy. It's hard to decide what to keep, and what to let go.**

**During worship at an old synagogue, when the Shema prayer was spoken, half the congregants stood up and half remained sitting. The half that was seated started yelling at those standing to sit down, and the ones standing yelled at the ones sitting to stand up.**

**The rabbi was educated in the Law and commentaries, but he didn't know what to do. It was suggested that he consult a homebound ninety-eight year old man who was one of the original founders of the temple. The rabbi hoped the man could tell him what the actual temple tradition was, so he paid a visit with a representative of each faction. The one representing**

those who stood said to the old man, "Is the tradition to stand during this prayer?" He answered, "No, that is not the tradition." The one representing those who sat asked, "Is the tradition to sit during Shema?" He answered, "No, that is not the tradition."

The rabbi then said to the old man, "But the congregants fight all the time, yelling at each other about whether..." The old man interrupted and said, "THAT is the tradition!"

My purpose isn't to suggest which traditions are most important. I will not say what we should ADOPT or AXE. I do want you to understand the necessity of tradition. William Kirkpatrick wrote a book titled, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right From Wrong*. He studied the causes of the moral illiteracy that is rampant among younger generations. He didn't point the finger of blame at the 1960's or Dr. Spock. He concluded: "In learning right from wrong, young people ought to have the benefit of ideas that have been around for a while."

The messages our youth get from song lyrics and the self-centered, sex-saturated media have an impact, but not as much of as the impact of parents and churches that neglect to pass on moral, ethical, and biblical foundations that hold life together. There was a popular song from the early 70's by the group Crosby, Stills, and Nash that underscores our responsibility. It was called, "Teach Your Children Well." C.K. Chesterton put it like this, "It ought to be the oldest things that are taught to the youngest people."

The church better hone its indoctrination skills because Christianity is always just one generation away from extinction. If the present generation doesn't teach the next, the ancient conversation will be silenced.

We have always been out of step the culture. We worship, pray, and study to turn the culture's values on its head. We teach each generation, "Look to the needs of others and don't get stuck on yourself. Pray for those who persecute you. The first finish last. Peace can't be won with Cruise missiles and patriotism isn't the test of citizenship. Peace will only be won when it is on the

**terms of the Prince of Peace, and the only freedom that matters is the freedom we have in Christ.**

**Should someone ask why you go to church, let me suggest a response that will make them pay attention. Tell them you go to church to HEAR FROM THE DEAD. I have said that every church should have a cemetery. We ought to bury our own close to us so we can keep an eye on them. On the way to worship, we would walk by, or better yet, THROUGH the cemetery, reading the names of the departed as we go. We would do it not just to remember our own mortality, but to recall the ongoing conversation of which we are a part.**

**With gratitude and affection, I have heard you say the names people who were instrumental in your decision to become a follower of Jesus. It wasn't something spectacular they did. They passed along what they heard departed saints pass along to them. In them you saw what life rooted in faith looks like.**

**Close your eyes for a moment and see what comes to you when you hear the names-Mel and Evelyn Miller, Ray and Mignon Fuller, Carl and Mary Kilmer, George Heeter, Hal Heeter, Sara Pletcher, Jim Peffly, Laura Lantz, Neil Retinger, Art Becker, Dale and Esther Cunningham, Devon Kenaga, Bob Thompson. Do you remember some of the things they said? If they could come back for just a moment, what would they say to you?**

**Listen to these words from the twelfth chapter of Hebrews:**

***Do you see what this means-all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we better get on with it. Strip down, start running-and never quit.... Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished the race we're in. Study how he did it, because he never lost sight of where he was headed-the exhilarating finish in and with God.***

**We aren't alone. We have a cheering section of countless saints cheering us on.**

**Times are tough for churches. There is so much quarrelling and conflict having to do with worship and tradition. In the name of tradition, some churches have dug a mote around themselves with no drawbridge so the spirit won't corrupt their way of doing things. They refuse to sing any hymn written after 1900. As a way of reaching the surrounding culture, other churches have tossed tradition and everything that relates to the past in the dumpster. They have gone contemporary, playing popular music with a Christian message embedded in it.**

**Those of the first sort die because they refuse to be part of the creativity born on the wings of the Holy Spirit. I predict that many of the contemporary churches that pack people into worship amphitheatres will in time, fade away. Pop culture is a flimsy foundation on which to build. What happens when it goes, "POP!"?**

**Two hundred years from now when Christians gather to worship, what do you suppose they'll still be singing--Come, Now is the Time to Worship, or, O God Our Help in Ages Past? Lord, I Lift Your Name on High, or, A Mighty Fortress? Thank God for new ways of worshipping and experiencing God's presence, but even more thank God for the generations of Christians who gave us firm foundations which will stand the test of time.**

**Do you remember Tevye, the father in the musical, Fiddler on the Roof? Tevye lived in the Russian village of Anatevka with his wife and three daughters. Life revolved around timeless traditions. But Tevya was challenged. Outside influences were impinging on their way of life.**

**His life became a balancing act, like a fiddler on the roof. It is tough to play a fiddle while straddled across a pitched roof. Too much leaning one way or the other will finish the music. Like the fiddler, Tevya had to find a balance between the old and the new. Like Tevye, we must keep our balance. Let's love our traditions, but not be stuck in them. Let's build upon what is important and join that long conversation of which we're blessed to be a part.**