

“It’s About Tradition”

Scripture: Joshua 4:1-7

William C. Pender

OAKLAND AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, 10/22/2006

In the Exodus story—the story of the people of Israel leaving Egypt and coming to the Promised Land—there are two water crossings. The most familiar one, of course, occurs under the leadership of Moses as the people cross through the Red Sea on dry land. Today in our reading, we have the other water crossing: crossing the River Jordan and entering into the Promised Land. After Moses’ death, his assistant Joshua leads the people. The last boundary to cross before entering the Promised Land is the Jordan River. Joshua leads the people through this river: the priests have carried the Ark of Covenant forward and a miraculous way across the Jordan is provided. We pick up the story after the crossing.

4 When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua: ² “Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, ³ and command them, ‘Take twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests’ feet stood, carry them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight.’ ” ⁴ Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. ⁵ Joshua said to them, “Pass on before the ark of the LORD your God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder, one for each of the tribes of the Israelites, ⁶ so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do those stones mean to you?’ ⁷ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever.”

When your children ask, “What do these stones mean?” the story of the crossing is to be told. Now as some of you may know, Palestine—this Promised Land—is a very stony terrain. Rocks and stones are everywhere. If the people of Israel cannot tell the story of what these particular stones mean, then they become worthless, unimportant, and ignored. They simply fade into background of all the other stones.

Here, in large part, is what it means to have a tradition, our theme for today. What it means to have a tradition is that we have some old stones that children and others will wonder: “Why in the world do you do have them? What makes them special?” If we say nothing at all...or “That’s the way we do things around here”... or, “We have always done it that way”...or, “Just do it, don’t expect explanations,” then we can expect that children and others will simply shake their heads and say that tradition is worthless, unimportant, and irrelevant.

It’s about tradition. Soon we will be putting out a summary of the data from the survey that many of you completed last May. We will also make the entire results available to the congregation members who would like to see it. One of the items coming out the survey is this: we rated ourselves not as a traditional congregation... but as a very traditional congregation (no real surprise

there!). That's who we are. Incidentally, we are set in a community that is much less traditional than we are (no surprise there!). One of the books that some of your leaders read this summer was about how traditional churches can be vital and not rigid, alive and not boring, spiritual and not doing more of the "same old, same old." One of the characteristics of these vital and traditional churches was this: these congregations were regularly about re-traditioning.

Re-traditioning—that was new a word for me. Re-traditioning is not having a drill sergeant beat patterns into people, but rather a re-examining of the spiritual practice that is renewed in the tradition. You see, too often tradition is heard as "NO," and not as an invitation to the experience of God.

Let me give you example of a tradition that is basically gone and probably is not coming back anytime soon. There was a time that when you walked in the doors of the Oakland Avenue sanctuary that the curtain of silence fell and you kept that silence until invited to participate in hymn or reading. This silence was meant to be reverential, reflective, and meditative. We live in a world with lots of sound...here there would be silence or organ music playing. Now we come into this sanctuary; we speak and catch up; we wave across the room; we are very alive and loud. We enjoy a time of being together. We renew ties because we many of us have not seen each other for a week or more.

Some of you may also recall that we tried for a time to have an elder or a minister call for a time of silence but it did not work very well. It came across as "Hush up!" or worse "Be quiet!" It came across as controlling and repressive. Could we have kept that tradition? Yes, in my opinion, but only if let's say 150 people made a commitment to tell their neighbors around them: "I have always found that silence is wonderful spiritual refreshment. God speaks me in that time: I read the Scripture text; I look at the texts to the hymns; I read through the prayer of confession. Would you join me in that silence? It will help me a lot; maybe you will find it helpful too." That's a re-traditioning: naming my need, telling the story of how I am revitalized, and asking others to help with it. Giving testimony as to why the tradition is good and asking for help: that's powerful.

Re-traditioning is getting in touch with the why and the what of a pattern of action and naming what stirs us. Recently, your church staff and Session had a struggle with tradition: the traditions associated with Sunday mornings at Oakland and Christmas Eve at Oakland. Our patterns on Sunday morning are reasonably clear: Two early worship services, one in the Sanctuary and one in the Fellowship Hall; Sunday School, and then the 11:00 a.m. service. Our patterns for Christmas Eve are also reasonably clear: home communion in the afternoon; 5:00 p.m. evening service, and 11:00 p.m. candlelight communion service. But what happens when Sunday and Christmas Eve happen on the same day (which it does this year)? The Sunday before Christmas is a big day in the life of a congregation—it's probably not best to mess with the schedule then—such as having only one morning service: seating would likely be a problem if we combined all the morning services. Our Christmas Eve services appear to be addressing a need: both evening services fill the sanctuary. The home communion visits certainly address a felt need. Dropping any of these Christmas Eve patterns did not seem like a good idea. Although everyone agreed that six services seemed like too much, there was not a consensus on altering the schedule either for the Sunday morning or for Christmas Eve. Having tradition means your ancestors or your past has a vote in your decision-

making. It is not that the past dictates your action...your tradition simply has a vote. In this case, tradition was the swing vote. We are going to follow our usual patterns because each of those services addresses a felt need for our faithful journey together as a congregation.

Re-traditioning: claiming old patterns and intentionally mining them for their meaning and vitality. One of the quiet re-traditioning patterns that has been going on here at Oakland has taken place just outside the sanctuary in our Memorial Garden. Here we have place of beauty, where it seems to me that something is blooming almost ten months out of the year. Our Memorial Garden is the tradition of graveyards outside old churches: cemeteries that mark the history of faithfulness from generation to generation. This Memorial Garden marks those who move beyond this life into a fuller life with God. Here is some re-traditioning that is going on. We have a place to remember and give thanks. When we hold service there, family members are invited to come forward and close in the hole where the ashes are interred...like the family closing the cemetery plot. Closing in the resting place of a loved one...an old tradition revitalized.

This re-traditioning is shaped by more than the old graveyard outside the church. We do not mark where the ashes are interred—there are no signs as to where anyone is buried because they are not there. What we return to the ground is not them, so we do not try to point at place and say, “There lies Aunt Susie.” Our Memorial Garden is not a cemetery with grave stones. No, on a very simple plaque on the brick wall there are names and dates: all uniform, there is no ostentation or individualistic display. The Garden bears witness to the communion of the saints: no marking a special spot—ashes to ashes, dust to dust...no lifting up one above another—we are all beloved by God.

So our Memorial Garden is a matter of re-traditioning...it is about telling story of why our patterns are meaningful and helpful.

Let me conclude with one further example of tradition. What has been major part of services in this sanctuary has been the tradition of singing hymns. One of the moves in contemporary worship is to move away from hymns and into the music that is closer to what people listen to and find enjoyable outside of the church—their Monday through Saturday music. That move is not new. During the Protestant Reformation, there was a revolution in church music. Martin Luther was known to have taken tunes from the German bars and taverns and used them for new songs in the church. He reportedly said that Satan should not have all the good tunes! Luther realized you had to use the music that stirred people in order reach them. Contemporary worship is following an old pattern.

So what’s ahead? Is the pattern of singing hymns going disappear? I was struck recently by a comment of a pastor who was asked whether his church still sang hymns (the tone of the question was more like “do you still sing those dull, boring dirges known as hymns?”). Well, this was a traditional church that did sing hymns, but I was fascinated by the response to “Do you still sing hymns?” “No,” the pastor said. “No, we sing poetry.”

We sing poetry...poetry is a creative expression of experience. Poetry may take several verses to develop an adequate expression of the experience. A chorus may not get at it. Poetry often takes time to develop and settle in...it may not take on the first go-around.

Consider, for example, how the most beloved hymn “Amazing Grace” builds a poem.

There is the initial wonder:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now and found was blind but now I see.

The greatness of “Amazing Grace” is that it builds on that initial wonder. The poetry sings of the passage of time with all pitfalls and problems:

Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come.
‘Tis grace that brought me save thus far, and grace will bring me home.

The verses continue to build until we come to that grand expression of what the future is like:

When we’ve been there ten thousand years bright shining as the sun
We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise than when we first begun.

In my opinion, we have certainly lost some of our capacity for poetry. Maybe it is just me, but I feel sort of unexpressed sigh when the congregation looks at a hymn and discovers there are five verses to sing. We can handle four...but five seems too much. To cut verses is to cut out part of the experience of writer, the experience of the movement of God in their lives. Every hymn we sing is a personal testimony of faith: an expression of this mystery and wonder of our faith.

So is the singing of hymns going to survive as viable practice of faith? I offer an opinion here: only if we can tell the story, name the experience, claim the faith of the poetry. Otherwise these hymns are just old stones that have no use.

Re-traditioning. It is about taking those patterns that we have practiced, naming what stirs within us in the practice, and sharing that stir. If we cannot name what stirs us, then we are simple like that great psychological experiment in conditioning, conducted by Pavlov. Pavlov created an experiment where he rang a bell, and then gave dogs something good to eat. After a while, all he had to do was ring the bell and dogs would begin to salivate, even if no food was present. Over time, when no food came with the bell, that reaction disappeared. All that was left was the clanging of the bell.

Re-traditioning...it is about naming and claiming the patterns that stir us to faith in Jesus Christ. So...ring the bell, but also name and claim the food.