

Tradition, Individuality and Faith

(sermon by Craig E. Tenke, September 19, 1999)

We humans sense the beauty of the earth and the grandeur of the universe as an intricate and overwhelming pattern that humbles us, yet energizes us. What is human life that it is sentient, self-aware? Why are we here? As sentient creatures, our emotional and spiritual response is one of worship, of acknowledging and basking in this glow of awe and this feeling of rightness, connectedness that has existed in man since prehistoric times.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.

And God said, “let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good . . .

The account of the creation in Genesis is firmly ingrained in the collective psyche of western civilization. It presents an archetypal, poetic image of the world, of mankind and our relationship to God. As Christians, it is the opening act of a complex anthology of poetry, myth, history and Law that culminates in Jesus.

What does it mean to follow Jesus? How do we apply ethical and religious Biblical traditions to a world composed of rapidly changing social structures of global scale, a world in which scientific findings redefine the tenuous balance between Biblical Law and empirical fact on what seems to be a daily basis? Society is changing. The very fabric of our lives is changing. As Christians, as Presbyterians, we ask ourselves: When should we take a stand against change, and when is it time to bite the bullet and go about the hard work required to reform our faith to meet the new age?

With our 250th celebration last year, we were lucky to have a clear reminder of the spiritual roots of our Reformed faith, and how our way of worship has evolved with the cultural and informational influences that permeate every aspect of our lives. Puritanical values and beliefs formed the basis of the identity of our denomination, yet the process of reform that defines our faith is an ongoing one, never finished, never static. Most of us don't feel we've lost that much by allowing males and females to sit together, and most would agree that acknowledgment of the spiritual equality of females with males was long overdue. Likewise, it is doubtful that any of us regret taking a stand against slavery in the United States.

As a sort of case study in the continuing struggle to apply and reform our faith in

these last days of the 20th century, I'd like to present some of my own observations on tradition, individuality and faith.

I am a creature of Tradition I'm a son and a father. My children now mark our 4th generation in this church. When I was born less than a half century ago, Center Moriches was a smaller, more rural hamlet than it is now. I learned to love God and His world. The congregation of this church was family, both literally and figuratively. The church was called "The First Presbyterian Church of the Moriches.," which was itself a part of the United Presbyterian Church. Without moving, I now belong to the "Presbyterian Church of the Moriches.," in a denomination called the Presbyterian Church (USA), reachable by internet at PCUSA.org.

I learned many religious traditions. I learned to show respect for God in silent, prayerful reflection. This attitude was particularly fostered in the sanctuary. No one would ever think of routinely having a boisterous "Passing of the Peace, Presbyterian style." Likewise, children learned reverence and respect for the sacrament of communion by observation, sitting quietly, not participating until they were confirmed as members. Because of a quirk in our church history, I learned to say "trespass" instead of "debts" in The Lord's Prayer. We had covered dish suppers every month, and always had a good turnout. There were fewer women and more gender specificity in the workplace. Not coincidentally, church-related study and activity groups that seem to be impossible to schedule nowadays were common. In the days when the denomination sought to free Angela Davis, I recall that Chuck Cozadd gave some memorable sermons about arcane, worldly subjects, including one about the play "No Exit" by the atheistic existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre. I also recall grumbles about all of the 50 cent words that he liked to use.

My wife and I were married in this church, as were my parents before us. The service was performed by the pastor of the East Moriches church, who wasn't horrified by the inclusion of a quotation from the Bagavad Gita in a Presbyterian service. The congregation was supportive throughout my educational marathon, and when it was time for us to raise a family, we were happy to baptize and teach our children here. Since day one, my kids have been as much a part of this church family as I was when I was young.

I'm also an Individual. We all differ along innumerable dimensions that define our humanness. In our culture, some of these differences are called disabilities. Our individual differences are the talents given by the master to his servants in the parable

in the Gospel of Matthew 25. We are compelled, even mandated to use these gifts, to make them grow in service of the master.

I am an elder and a neuroscientist. God made me a believer *and* a scientist, regardless of what I *chose* to do with my talents. I am a Presbyterian because of the spiritual nurturance provided by my family and this congregation. The neuro- part also came with training. These attributes are related to the formal aspects of my life.

God made me to question; I can't be any different. I lean toward obsessive-compulsive disorder, uncertain of events in the world around me. I set two alarm clocks each night before I go to sleep, then check them both a few times, just in case. Coupled with a few technical and mathematical skills, this attribute ultimately led me to science. Science is an organized, fact-finding discipline. Incorrect assumptions or models are eliminated over time by continuous scrutiny. Science is a process, conducted by meticulous people standing on the shoulder's of giants. Giants, but not gods.

Science deals with verifiable empirical facts, not "Truth" or the "Reasons" for things. **Reasons** just **aren't** in the details and the mechanisms of life. Meaning requires that we span the gap across individuals, and point to a higher cause or purpose. There is a leap of faith required to maintain human life. Likewise, a goal of mental health is to help an individual to maintain the appropriate level of optimism required to lead an adaptive, fulfilled, forward-looking life. Cold, objective, reality oriented behavior is neither healthy, nor human.

My innate questioning can't be turned on and off like a faucet. At the same time I learned to respect God and man, I couldn't ignore the transience of human understanding and authority. With what could be facetiously described as "the wisdom of youth," I witnessed tempests in teapots and important problems that were ignored. There were many obvious things that the people around me didn't appear to grasp. And yet, from these same people, I saw examples of faith under fire that always left me humbled. My Grandmother used to say, "Why can't you just take it on faith?" My mother assured her that I was just growing into my faith in my own way. I suspect that she was right.

I can't account for which of my quirks ultimately lead to my positive perceptions of my church, nor can I account for why some people feel less welcome. The most obvious possibilities reflect the family-related manner by which our traditions are generally transferred. Nurturance of faith is an important responsibility of parenthood. We also nurture respect for the traditions of family, congregation, this and other denominations, and the nation. Yet these are selfish concerns. Our family in Christ extends much further from home.

There are innumerable differences between people in hard-wired, God-given traits that have a profound impact on matters of faith and tradition. Yes, there's the usual list of positive character traits that are paraphrased in the Boy Scout and Girl Scout Laws. But there are other innate factors that were long unrecognized. These include such traits as anxiety, depression, and sexuality. Such traits precede and interact strongly with many life choices.

While I've never felt anything but nurtured and protected by my congregation and faith, there are others who were less fortunate. One such person joined the church, but as she grew to adulthood and she began to understand herself, and she started to distance herself from the congregation. Nothing confrontational, nothing "in your face" or in "bad taste." When asked by a deacon, she confided that she "just didn't belong." The deacon couldn't grasp the problem, and had no response. She strayed like a sheep in the night, with no "Good Shepherd" to look for her. I am deeply, spiritually troubled by cases such as this. I tell myself that I was small, that times were different, that it was her choice. I tell myself that we don't have any evidence that anyone could have done anything that would have changed the outcome. All of these rationalizations are true. But she was one of our own, and we failed her.

So who are we really responsible for, anyway? Present day Christianity is going through an identity crisis. Christians often feel threatened and confused by the social, cultural and ethical changes in the world. We ask ourselves, "If Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law, is it *sufficient* to Love God and Love our neighbor, as Jesus taught us, or do we risk throwing away the necessary *structure* required for our faith to work and grow? If we fail to maintain key traditions or scriptural laws, how can we even consider ourselves to be Christian?"

The secular world often appears to treat *all* traditional religious practice as mere superstition, even while it seeks spirituality in each new quasi-religion. As Christians, we find ourselves branded for a loss of balance in our moralizing about sex above human relationships, or putting concerns about salvation above those of human compassion. When confronted by *disrespect and bad taste* in society at large, many Christians *retaliate* by displaying their personal beliefs before the media in a very unChristian manner. While some Christian traditions must be defended with our lives, we may actually *forfeit* our claim to others if we *choose* a confrontation. The result is the alienation or exclusion of people who want and need the fellowship of Christ. Our “Traditional Values” drive them away.

One thing is certain: as Christians, we must follow the example of He who fulfilled the Law by breaking it, He who healed on the Sabbath, who ate with sinners and tax collectors, who dared to rescue an adulteress from lawful execution. We must follow He who was betrayed, tried, convicted and crucified by people who did their best to be good, to follow the rules and traditions in accordance to God’s Law . . . people not much different than we are. Sometimes the most difficult part is to overcome our own self-righteousness long enough to humbly admit that we *may not* always know the will of God, after all, and to remember that *not one* of us is acceptable on our own, but only through Divine Grace.

I’ve been a participant in an e-mail meeting on “The nature of the unity we seek in our diversity” on Presbynet. I’d like to close with a response I received regarding our responsibility as a church to those who we’ve failed to nurture. James Ayers, who writes a column for *Presbyterians Today*, said:

I think we all want to find the way to connect with all our young people. We have failed with some because we are too conservative in our theology, with others because we are too liberal; with some because we are too liturgical in our worship, with others because we are too free-form; with some because we will not include noncelibate homosexuals among the ordained, with others because we are willing to include homosexuals among our membership.

With these illustrative cautions in mind, let each of us, individually and as a congregation, continue to work, struggle, learn and pray in order to better serve Christ in the next millenium.

HYMN:

Morning has broken 469 (B)

Old testament lesson:

Genesis I:1-5; 26-31

HYMN:

For the beauty of the earth 473 (B)

New testament lesson:

Matthew 25:14-30

Sermon: Traditions, Individuality and Faith

HYMN:

Open my eyes that I may see 324 (B)

HYMN:

I danced in the morning 302 (B)