
Good Tradition Ties Us to Good Ground

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
Proper 15 – Year C
Homecoming Sunday

“Tradition. Without our traditions,” Tevye says in the Broadway show, *Fiddler on the Roof*, “without our traditions, our lives would be as shaky as... as a fiddler on the roof!”

On this homecoming Sunday at the Cathedral of St. Philip, I want to say one thing: Tradition! Why go to Church in this present age? Why go back to Church? The answer is: Tradition. But first, a story:

As many of you know, I take a retreat each summer. I make my pilgrimage to the bush country of Ontario, Canada. It is off-road and full of trees and water, brush and bush. When I walk off the trail up there, I am in twisted brambles and maple saplings and ferns, thick layers of old leaves and peat, and lots of rock. Rock stones and boulders lay hidden everywhere.

People ask what I do up there. Actually, I just do my chores. Everyday domestic routines are often a challenge up there. Here in Atlanta, we just turn on a switch for utilities, like water and electricity. Up there, the power is out regularly, as trees fall on the lines in the bush. We have to lug drinking water in jugs from another cabin that has a well. We have to fix septic systems. And don't even mention things like internet service; television itself is almost outlawed among the lakers. We fix stuff up there, and then we fix some more stuff.

Those are all our chores, and we do them daily. It's how we spend our time on what might truly be called a monastic-type of retreat, where one works, eats, and prays. (At least some of us pray.)

One of my projects this year was to fashion cedar wood handles for some of our swinging screen doors. These screen doors are important, the bastion of our defense from the pesky mosquitos! It was my intention to find some precisely curved cedar limbs out in the woods, trim and cut them the right way, and have them serve as the handles for the screen doors. So I set to work. I found my little handsaw. Granted, I am not an expert carpenter, but I like to think of myself as a carpenter up there. I set to work trimming and shaping the cedar handle with my little hand saw.

But the saw kept catching and sticking, so that it did more bending than cutting. In my usual impatience, I began to get frustrated, wondering why the saw was so dull, why it wouldn't cut. I thought it might even slip and wound me. I wondered how I might sharpen it better.

But then I figured it out. As some of you true carpenters realize, I was simply not supporting the major limb, from which I was trimming the smaller branch. The larger limb kept slipping and sliding around, preventing my saw from cutting straight. When I finally found a good position to stand on the major limb, thereby supporting the whole enterprise, the saw cut through just fine. All it needed was support. All the saw needed was a firm foundation, a firm foundation from which to cut the branches, prune the vines.

Saws cut better when they are working with a firm foundation. My work went wonderfully once I had figured that out. And, now, there are some lovely curved cedar handles on the screen doors of our little cabin. We shut the doors tightly to keep out the mosquitos; we open those doors easily and they lead us to heaven!

The handles were made successfully because I had a sure foundation. That's part of my answer to the question, “Why go to Church?” Because I want to stand on firm foundations. I call those foundations our “tradition.” We need tradition these days. The Christian Church, and the world, needs good tradition.

Have any of you ever flown a kite? What fun! The mere sight of a kite soaring and dipping and diving above us sets us free, doesn't it? We imagine that we are soaring, too. It is thrilling to watch the flying freedom of a kite.

But do you know how kites fly? Do you know what allows them to stay up in the air, and not come tumbling downward? It is the string. Kites fly because they are on a string, a string which is fixed somehow to the ground. Without a string, a kite would tumble to the ground.

This, too, is how I understand tradition. Our spirits love to fly. Our spirits love to soar. But our carefree spirits also need to be attached to something if they are going to stay up in the air. Our spirits need tradition.

Yes, people wonder, "What can Church offer us during these changing times? What can the tired, old Church offer us? The frustrating, troublesome, stumbling Church? The broken, mistake-prone Church?"

Well, the Church offers us a community of tradition that has stood many tests of floppy saws and untethered kites. The Church has suffered through pandemic and disease before. The Church has endured sin and mistakes before. The Church keeps telling an old story, an old story of grace and salvation that actually becomes new every time we tell it. The Church gives us a foundation to which we tie the string of our kites, the string of our spirits!

The Church is that great cloud of witnesses that the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of this morning, and such a motley group it seems to be. The phrase that best describes them is that they "won strength out of weakness" (Hebrews 11:34). The Church is a great cloud of witnesses "looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Heb 12:2).

"Pioneer and Perfecter" the text says. The origin and the goal. A true Christian tradition ties us to that pioneer and perfecter. Pioneers and perfecters actually know how to change, how to change gracefully, and how to change tradition gracefully.

But it does matter what tradition we are a part of. It matters which community of witnesses we want to be a part of. Some communities, sadly, spread disease and anxiety. Fear and paranoia. Those diseases are contagious, and they can be destructive. Oh, what fear and isolation, and even trauma we have known in the last two years. I do not need to rehearse it for us this morning. We were so afraid of catching the virus, that that fear took up residence in us. Many of us didn't so much catch the virus, but we caught the fear. It was the fear and trauma that invaded our lives. The fear virus destroys us. It makes our handsaws break and brings our spirited kites crashing down to the ground.

But other communities of witness, the good ones, spread the amazing fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, faithfulness, gentleness. These other communities witnessed such grace even in the midst of disease. They won strength out of weakness. The true Christian tradition teaches us that there are other realities that are contagious. It's not just illness that is contagious. It is love, joy, peace—patience, kindness, generosity—faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, as Saint Paul said (Galatians 5:22).

Those are the solid foundations that enable us to build good doors. Those are the graceful kite strings that allow our spirits to soar.

We go to Church in order to catch the good things that are contagious: to catch good life, to catch the good winds of life. The fruits of the Spirit lift us up. They give us life. They give us life even in the midst of death. We go to Church to find a tradition to stand on, to find a steady place where we can fly our spiritual kites. Good tradition ties us to good ground.

Yes, there are lots of things that are contagious in the world! Good Christianity is one of them! Good faith is contagious! Good love is contagious! Good tradition is contagious! We come to church to catch those kinds of things. God be with us.

AMEN.

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