



Tradition

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph Schaller
The Fifth Sunday of Easter ~ May 19, 2019*

Acts 11:1-18

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

Psalm 148

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| 1 Alleluia! Praise God from the heavens; *
sing praise in the heights. | tempestuous wind, doing God’s will; |
| 2 Sing praise, all you angels; *
sing praise, all the heavenly host. | 9 Mountains and all hills, *
fruit trees and all cedars; |
| 3 Sing praise, sun and moon; *
sing praise, all you shining stars. | 10 Wild beasts and all cattle, *
creeping things and winged birds; |
| 4 Sing praise, heaven of heavens *
and you waters above the heavens. | 11 Rulers of the earth and all peoples, *
judges and all leaders of the world; |
| 5 Let them praise the Name of God, *
by whose command they were created. | 12 Young men and maidens, *
old and young together. |
| 6 God made them stand fast for ever and ever, *
and gave them a law which shall not pass away. | 13 Let them praise your Name, O God, *
for your Name only is exalted;
your splendor is over earth and heaven. |
| 7 Sing praise from the earth, *
you sea-monsters and all deeps; | 14 You have raised up strength for your people
and praise for all your loyal servants, *
the children of Israel, a people who are near you. Alleluia! |
| 8 Fire and hail, snow and fog, * | |

Revelation 21:1-6

I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed

away.” And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.”

John 13:31-35

At the last supper, when Judas had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Unless you are somewhat infatuated with the genre of Broadway musicals—and are of a certain age—you may not have heard of the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. It was first produced in 1964, became a film a few years later, and has been revived on Broadway about a zillion times, not to mention the countless number of college and high school performances. It's a story of the Jewish inhabitants of a small Russian shtetl of Anatevka in 1905, where their lives are as precarious as the perch of a fiddler on a roof. They are seeking to maintain their lives against the encroaching domination of imperialist Russia, as well as the changing mores of a new era which threatens their conventional way of living. Tevye is a milkman, the father of five daughters. The first challenge to their way of life occurs when his oldest daughter falls in love with a childhood friend—a tailor—and wants to marry him. But Tevye has already decided that his daughter would marry an older and more prosperous butcher, since it was the custom and prerogative for the father to determine whom his daughter would marry. His daughter protests, and, as first, Tevye cannot conceive of marrying for love rather than circumstance. He is eventually won over by his daughter, but is then faced with the daunting prospect of convincing his wife. So he has a dream. He awakes in the middle of the night as if from a nightmare, and his wife offers to interpret the dream. In it, her grandmother has returned from beyond the grave to give her blessing to the marriage of her great-granddaughter to the tailor, not the arranged marriage to the butcher. Surely, there has been a mistake, But then, a more sinister spirit appears—the deceased former wife of the butcher, who threatens to murder the young bride should the marriage be consummated. By the end, Tevye's wife is persuaded that it is all for the best that her daughter marry the young tailor. It is only later that we learn that Tevye has concocted the whole thing. (Check it out: *Tevye's Dream* on YouTube.)

Tradition is the anchor of our identity. But it can also be the oppressor of what seeks to emerge as new and to liberate those confined to a regressive way of doing things.

I found myself thinking about Tevye's dream in light of Peter's vision as recorded in Acts. Although less entertaining than Tevye's dream, it no less portends a very significant cultural shift. The idea that a vision of a sheet being lowered from heaven containing all manner of animals, beasts and birds may strike you as being merely bizarre—perhaps a product of Peter's dehydration in the desert. I actually kind of wonder if Peter might have made it up, believing, like Tevye, he needed something a little dramatic and supernatural to win over a skeptical crowd! But the issue at hand is significant: a conflict between those who were circumcised—in other words—Jews who had been drawn to Christianity—vs. the upstart Gentiles who were being accepted as Christians without first acquiring the traditions of the chosen people, such as circumcision and the practice of keeping kosher. From our perspective this may seem trivial or self-obvious. But many theologians point to this as being one of the most significant shifts in self-identity of the Church in history. In the gospels, we occasionally hear of Jesus' gravitation toward those beyond the Jewish community, an action which usually provokes consternation and complaint. But by the end of the first century, Christianity has evolved from being merely a sect within Judaism to being an independent entity. Indeed, a new creation, part of a new heaven and a new earth.

Whether we see ourselves as traditionalists or not, the prospect of change is usually fraught with challenge. Sure, we can become bored or indifferent to the status quo, but when it comes to fundamentally changing a way of life which has become familiar, we may find ourselves highly resistant. This is especially the case when the change feels forced upon us by circumstances we cannot control, or others who demand that we embrace a different point of view.

Earlier this week I was reading about Willmar Minnesota, a small town not far from St. Cloud which until recently would fit neatly within Garrison Keillor's myth of Lake Wobegon. It was a town dominated by white Lutherans of Scandinavian decent who made their livelihood in manufacturing plants producing everything from steel to processed food. But then things began to change.

Columnist Thomas Friedman spoke of revisiting the town where his Jewish Aunt and Uncle had lived as somewhat of an exotic oddity in a sea of Lutherans, only to find that unlike other towns in the Midwest which have become dominated by unemployed white males, an opioid epidemic, and a zealous opposition to all things "foreign, Willmar has somehow managed to embrace change. He visited the local high school, where the principal proudly showed him a large map in the entrance area of the school, where...

At the start of every school year, members of the Student Council climb up a ladder to the map, remove the pins of the graduates and insert fresh ones for the new ninth graders. That map has pins from some 30 countries across Latin America, the Middle East, Asia and the rest of the world. Willmar, population 21,000, is now nearly half Latino, Somali and a Noah's ark of other East African and Asian immigrants. The languages spoken in the

high school include English, Arabic, Somali, Spanish and Karen (spoken by an ethnic group from Myanmar).

The adaptation to new populations has been slow and not always easy, but Willmar's success is attributed to leadership in the community who realized the importance of sustaining vibrant community with plenty of job opportunities and "complex adaptive coalitions" a phrase that refers to groups of citizen what formed to seek ways to bridge the cultural gaps that immigration has caused. For example, while there are English classes for Somali adults, there are also classes for other to learn how to speak the Somali language. When East African Muslims began arriving in the 2000's, many in the town banded together to help them build their own mosque.

A more traditional Christianity and our society would assume that the goal of spreading the Gospel would entail enticing those who are not Christian to become so, rather than supporting them in their own customs and traditions of faith. The implication in the former approach is the message that "you are welcomed here if you become more like us" rather than "we welcome you as you are" or even "we want to all become more than who we were by knowing who you are." In this case, all are changing toward something new. Embracing the new is not an imposition, but an opportunity. Part of Wilmar's success was the opportunity to create new jobs in place of those which had disappeared, as well as filling the job openings that remained. Wilmar currently has almost full employment, thanks largely to the creative energies of those who saw the immigrant population as potential co-workers who could join together to create a good life for all—in other words, a community.

Many of us may find it easy to be nostalgic for what we have known and for what makes us comfortable. But in the Resurrection stories, Jesus was quick to send his followers out into a future which could not be completely imagined. The resurrection is about creation, not restoration or preservation. "See, I am making all things new!" Our faith is rooted and grounded in the life, death and resurrection of the Christ, but it takes shape in a church which is continually about improvisation. Those who insist that tradition means holding onto a pure and pristine version of "the church" seemed to have skipped reading the New Testament! In the same way, those who believe that the best thing for America would be to return to the 1950's are clearly not seeing things through the eyes of a person of color, a woman, a gay, bisexual or transgendered individual, or someone who is poor. Nor are they seeing things through the eyes of those who have embraced the forward-looking core of the Easter event.

Yes, we are literally making it up as we go along, but not without God's stewardship through the Spirit. We are "composing our lives" to adapt a phrase from Mary Catherine Bateson's writing—with the dominant trope of the love of God manifested in Jesus, and called forth in all who follow the Christ.