

March 15, 2009
John 2:13-22
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
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Reforming Tradition

A woman is fixing a large pot roast as she has many times before. She cuts one end off and sticks it on the side. Her husband has seen her do this many times before, but this time he queries, “Why do you cut the end off the pot roast?” She stops, looks puzzled, and replies, “I don’t know. My mother always did it this way.” Later she calls her mother and asks about this custom. Her mother laughs, saying, “Well we had a really small oven and a small pan so I had to cut it to make it fit.” Without any conscious decision the daughter had made cutting off the end of the pot roast a family tradition.

Carrying on conscious and unconscious family traditions is one of the things that is always a challenge to people in a married or partnered relationship. Each person has particular customs, practices, rituals, traditions that were built into their upbringing and they want to continue, or in some instances definitely not continue, them.

Holidays are one of the places where those traditions come rushing to the forefront and often create tension. I remember when Ron and I were first married, I thought it was strange that he wanted to open Christmas presents on Christmas Eve, where in my experience you got to open one on Christmas Eve and the rest were for Christmas morning. In addition, there were particular foods that were important to him at Christmas, foods that had no significance for me. And whose extended family do you go to for the holidays?

Well to complicate things we both worked on Christmas Eve. So many of the traditions that were important to both of us, simply

weren’t possible. Which was probably a good thing. Over the years we had to reform our traditions and create customs that honored what was most important from our backgrounds but that were meaningful and also worked for us today. For instance our special family meal for the four of us is on Dec. 23, which we call Little Christmas Eve, instead of Dec. 24. It works for us.

Too often couples and families feel bound by the customs of the past and wear themselves out trying to do it all at Christmas time, which is counter to the true tradition of Christmas – to celebrate God with us.

This month we’re doing a sermon series on characteristics of vital mainline churches as identified by Diana Butler Bass, a church educator. Two weeks ago we considered hospitality, last week Winston talked about sharing our stories, and this week we are looking at reforming tradition. Diana Butler Bass found that the vital churches she observed all lived in the creative tension between tradition and change.

The one thing we can count on is change. Change is swirling around us at this time in history. Economic, political, social, environmental, and even ecclesiastical change. So what are we to do? Dig in our heels and hide out? Or change everything to appeal to the present? There is wisdom to be gained from the past and also opportunities to be addressed for the future.

We find ourselves in a conversation between tradition and traditionalism. Jaroslav Pelikan put it this way. *“Tradition is the living faith of dead people to which we must add our chapter while we have the gift of life.”*

Traditionalism is the dead faith of living people who fear that if anything changes, the whole enterprise will crumble."

Diana Butler Bass found that vital churches were not about change just for change's sake, but were not afraid to adapt and change in responding to the heart of faith. The change, the reforming of tradition that these congregations were engaged in, often was a *fluid retraditioning* that "appeals to a 'core lineage' of believing, experiences, and practices based upon the experience of 'past witnesses' which emphasizes both continuity and change."

(The Practicing Congregation, pg. 42)

Her exploration of these ideas is helpful, because she points out that when we find ourselves in a struggle in the church about what is often framed as tradition vs. contemporary, what we are sometimes dealing with is rival views of tradition. There are a multitude of traditions or customs in Christian practice and sometimes the tension is over which of those has more influence.

Here is an example from our own heritage here at First Parish. When our sanctuary was built, there was only room for four people in the choir loft. In fact it was really just an organ loft. New England Congregationalists didn't have a high regard for vocal music. I suspect part of it may have been its appeal to our emotions, but I'm not sure. Anyway, it was their custom not to do much with vocal music.

The back two pews that are raised in the center were for the choir in the early years. Over time the choir loft has been expanded twice to now hold about 70 people. We have retraditioned our space to make possible our ministry of music. We have retraditioned our practice to make more room for the tradition

of telling our story and our stories through singing.

Now, if we hadn't reformed our tradition over the years imagine what we would have missed last Sunday afternoon. I want to take a moment to thank Ray and the choir for all their work in sharing with us the complete work of Handel's Messiah. In doing so, they reformed tradition as well. They reformed the tradition of cutting out parts of the piece, because of its length, and instead retraditioned and sang the whole piece for us. I was reminded of how the piece itself, by librettist, Charles Jennings, retraditions the selections of scripture by making particular choices of which scripture to include.

It was a wonderful experience. The highlight for me was the Amen chorus, which is at the very end. It felt like waves of voices moving around the room. Thank you, choir.

One of the struggles with tradition is that certain customs and practices are prone to becoming institutionalized. Too often they are ones that focus on perpetuating the institution more than living the faith. Yet, we cannot live with out institutions. Once you have two people together you have an institution of one sort or another. The question is will that institution get mired in its own footprints?

Here comes Jesus. Jesus was a reformer. He sought to re-form the people in the core beliefs, experiences, and practices of the faith. He knew how easy it is to get caught up in our buildings, our budgets, our programs....As Susan said earlier, he reminded the people of the ten commandments, and yet re-formed them into Love God, Love Neighbor. Effectively, he said everything can be tested against this. Does what your doing help you to Love God and Love Neighbor?

In today's story of the cleansing of the temple, Jesus challenges the religious institution and its leaders, as he so often did. This is one of the gospel stories that is in all four gospels, which lends it particular significance. It helps us to see the developing tension between Jesus and the temple authorities.

Jesus is challenging the core custom, the tradition, the cultic practice of animal sacrifice. The money changers were in the temple because the animals for sacrifice had to be bought with Jewish money. The people would come and exchange their Roman money for Jewish money and then they would be able to buy the sacrificial animals. Now, whether Jesus had some sensitivity to the rights of the animals that come to our consciousness I don't know. But from considering his Love Neighbor focus he would have been asking what of the people who did not have enough money to buy such sacrifices? They were disenfranchised from the temple. How were they to pray in the temple? In the three synoptic gospel accounts of this story Jesus re-traditions the temple, identifying it as a house of prayer, not a house of sacrifice. A house of prayer to which all people, even those who couldn't afford it, should be welcome.

So, I've been pondering our building and our practices and what are the things in our customs that challenge our calling to Love Neighbor.

When I first came, I asked people how the congregation decided to stay in this location and this building at the time of the restoration. Everyone knows we have challenges with parking, with traffic patterns, and our buildings are not able to be connected with one another. A couple of answers I heard consistently were – it would

have cost too much to relocate and we value the heritage of this building. People felt called to be good stewards of this space. These are important considerations. And this is a special building.

But there is a third reason that I have heard that keeps coming back to me. That reason is that it is important to be in downtown Brunswick. I know the community likes us being here because of the striking visual landmark. But the question for us is what ministry and mission are possible for us because we are right here in downtown Brunswick? I realize that some of the people who come to see our church social worker are able to do so because we are here in town and they can walk to get here. We have recently had a request to provide space for a craft workshop experience for people who are using Tedford housing because the people who would use it can walk here. These are opportunities for us to love our neighbors.

But what of their spiritual needs? This is a house of prayer. Are there ways for us today to offer our house of prayer to those who have felt disenfranchised from the church for whatever reason?

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