



Worship Series: Thanksgiving—A Christian Way of Life

“Stewards of the Traditions”

Preaching Text: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

10 November 2013

25th Sunday after Pentecost

FUMC, Arlington, Texas 76011

Sometime prior to November 1863, the committee in charge of the official dedication for the National Cemetery at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, asked President Abraham Lincoln to speak. However, Lincoln was not the principal speaker. The primary speaker that day was Edward Everett. The following day, Everett wrote Lincoln in a pronounced gesture of charity: “I wish that I could flatter myself that I had come as near to the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes.”

Although he was not the featured orator that day, America remembered Lincoln’s 272-word address as one of the most significant speeches in American history. In it, Lincoln summoned the principles of human equality contained in the Declaration of Independence. He also linked the sacrifices of the Civil War with the desire for “a new birth of freedom,” as well as the all-important preservation of the Union and its ideal of self-government created in 1776.

Today we explore what it means to be a steward of the tradition. I would like to share a minor tradition with you that has become part of my life. As a pastor, when escorting a person to his/her final resting place at the D/FW National Cemetery, I stop and read The Gettysburg Address posted on a granite marker at the Visitor’s Center. I do it every time because it helps me remember that I am a part of something that is much greater than my own narrow and provincial point of view. I belong to a great nation that has had many persons make great sacrifices over two centuries—and of which I am a beneficiary.

Hear these words of The Gettysburg Address before we turn to Paul:

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.



Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Nine days from now (19 November 2013) we will recall the sesquicentennial of Lincoln's speech at Gettysburg. Therefore it is fitting that we should note it as part of our nation's tradition. Tomorrow is Veteran's Day and it was originally "dedicated to the cause of world peace and known as 'Armistice Day.'" Now we honor all veterans. Let us pray: God of the ages, we thank you for all the men and women who have served in the armed forces of this country. We thank you for the freedom which their sacrifice has earned and guarded for us and for the people of the world. Help us to prize this freedom and use it well.

We seek your blessings today for all living veterans and their families. Give them a sense of satisfaction in their labors and help them know just how much this nation appreciates their service.

Come to the aid of those who have stumbled and who have no one to lift them up. Guide those who are having difficulty finding their way. Comfort those who grieve. Heal those who bear physical, emotional or spiritual wounds. Stand with those who provide care to them. Move us all to reach out in love to our neighbors who are veterans, or relatives of veterans, or who currently serve in the military.

We pray for the day when no one needs to take up arms. Help us to live now in anticipation of that day, as people who long for peace, who pray for peace, and who seek to be peacemakers in this world. Amen (Adapted from a Veterans Day Prayer adopted by the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program of the PCUSA and modified by Mark Roberts in 2006).

Now hear the lesson for the day:

1 As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you, brothers and sisters, 2 not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here. 3 Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. 4 He



opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God. 5 Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you . . . ?

13 But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. 14 For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. 15 So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.

16 Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, 17 comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word (2 Thessalonians 2:15, 13-17).

Our focus is on Paul's phrase: "hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us." While the word "tradition" is not a "four-letter word," many church quarters treat it as such. Perhaps devaluing tradition occurs not only in church but in our world. For far too many people today, both young and old, history and its corresponding tradition smells of dingy, dusty archives from which we moderns garner little useful data to live our present cultured lives.

Yet tradition offers believers compelling stories of faith to inspire and instruct. As G. K. Chesterton noted in his book *Orthodoxy*: "Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about." As were the Thessalonians, we too are stewards of the time-honored tradition extended to us by both Scripture and many faithful believing generations.

Yet we find in the day's epistle lesson one of the few positive scriptural references to tradition. Even Jesus was unsympathetic of the uncritical use of tradition when he said to the guilty: "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition" (Mark 7:8-9)! Given Jesus' words, legitimate stewards will handle church tradition with care. It is true that we need to discard many elements of tradition—traditions of male domination, of slavery, of



implied spiritual hierarchy of clergy over lay people, and so on. But a culture that discounts its tradition is a culture that will soon lose its anchor when the winds of change blow—as they always do.

Paul urges the Thessalonians to “stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.” Paul knows that the embryonic church must establish itself in the faith realities of daily life. Paul also is aware of “false witnesses” (Acts 6:13), “false apostles,” “false brothers/sisters” (2 Corinthians 11:13, 26), and “false believers” (Galatians 2:4). As a precaution against false doctrine, Paul urges the Thessalonians to rely on the fixed value of the tradition. It is tradition’s fixed value that offers believers an anchor in the storms of change.

Good stewards heed the words of Jesus and Paul. On the one hand, the church can and has used tradition as a weapon against just causes and helpful advances in the world. On occasion the church has exploited tradition to hide from the prophetic mandate to “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). Too habitually not to bear guilt and shame, the church has “neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith” (Matthew 23:23). Like patriotism, tradition can become a refuge for cowards or scoundrels (Samuel Johnson: “Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel”).

On the other hand, good stewards also recognize the value of tradition rightly interpreted and used. Tradition protects the church from theological fraud, as Paul well knew. Tradition shields the faith from acutely renegade theologies and its proponents, for example, “the prosperity gospel.” For stewards the role of Christian tradition steers us by our remembrance of prior issues of faith and belief. Used in this fashion tradition supplies a defense against flawed doctrine and theology. Finally, the Bible stands as the decisive test for stewards to judge tradition’s merits—and then to live by them.