

“The Power of Traditions”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney ~ September 10, 2023

Exodus 12:1-14, Matthew 18:15-20

A little girl asked her mother, “Mommy, why do you cut the ends off the meat before you cook it?” The girl’s mother told her that she thought it added to the flavor by allowing the meat to better absorb the spices, but perhaps she should ask her grandmother since she always did it that way. So, the little girl finds her grandmother and asks, “Grandma, why do you and Mommy cut the ends of the meat off before you cook it?”

Her grandmother thought a moment and answered, “I think it allows the meat to stay tender because it soaks up the juices better, but why don’t you ask your Nana, after all, I learned from her, and she always did it that way.” The little girl is getting a little frustrated, but climbs up in her great-grandmother’s lap and asks, “Nana, why do you cut the ends off the meat before you cook it?” Nana answered, “I don’t know why anyone else would do it. I did it because my pot wasn’t big enough.”

Tradition is meant to be a guide and not a jailer.

After God appears to Moses in the burning bush and says he will send him to liberate the Israelites, Moses says, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (Exodus 3:11). Moses is clearly not looking for a new career.

Then Moses says, “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent ... I am slow of speech and slow of tongue” (4:10). He knows that he is not up for the task. So, God allows Aaron, the brother of Moses, to speak to the people for Moses.

After God sends plagues on the land of Egypt, God gives Moses and Aaron instructions about the celebration of the Passover. God says, “This sacred meal shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance” (12:14). Passover is an institution that is formative for the Jewish people, shaping their lives from the time of Moses to today.

During Passover, Jews eat a piece of meat, “roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs” (v. 8). They remember that their ancestors ate hurriedly, because they had to escape after the Lord passed over the land and killed the

firstborn of the Egyptian families. It is called Passover because God said, “I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt” (v. 13).

The traditional Passover dinner is organized around telling the Passover story, it’s an opportunity for Jews to connect themselves with their history; to think more consciously about those who are still oppressed today; and to hope that people today will know freedom.

So how does Passover shape the Jewish people? It reminds them that God worked powerfully to liberate their ancestors from slavery, and it connects them with this important history. It also awakens their compassion toward people who are oppressed today — migrants who are traveling toward freedom, as well as people who are trapped in poverty or ethnic strife.

Not that Passover’s influence is limited only to the Jews, African Americans in slavery, used the story of Exodus as a metaphor for their struggle. Think of the spiritual, “Go Down, Moses,” which linked ancient Jews to African American slaves. Or Harriet Tubman, the great liberator of slaves — she was called “Moses.”

So, what are the traditions that can be formative for us as Christians?

The first comes out of Passover itself: The sacrament of the Lord’s supper or Communion. When Jesus was celebrating the Passover with his disciples, he took a loaf of bread, gave it to the disciples, and said, “take, eat; this is my body.” then he took a cup and gave it to them, saying, “drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:26-28).

The sacrament is a tradition that forms us and feeds us as followers of Christ. We eat the bread, which is the body of Christ, so that we can become the body of Christ, the physical presence of Jesus in the world today. Nourished by this bread, we are strengthened to be the hands and feet of Jesus, showing his love, and advancing his mission and ministry. In the Lord’s supper, the blood of the covenant is not used to mark doorways and escape death. But it has saving power — it reminds us that the blood of Christ was “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (v. 28). When we drink the cup, we are freed from sin and liberated to be Christ’s people in the world.

Another institution that can shape us is the Christian community itself. Now it is true that churches are full of fallible people, and no congregation is flawless. But

the apostle Paul is right to say that the church is the one body of Christ, and “in the one spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13).

No leader on a stage can be as supportive or inspiring as a community that is open to the power of the Holy Spirit. The power of community is like the power of a river. When a river is flowing freely, it can nourish and sustain life. But when a river is dammed up, it becomes stagnant and useless.

In the same way, when people are isolated and disconnected from each other, they become weak and vulnerable. But when people are connected in community, they are stronger and more resilient.

There are many examples of the power of community. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw how communities came together to support each other. People volunteered to deliver food and supplies to those in need. They checked in on their neighbors and friends. And they created online communities where people could connect and share their experiences.

Our various ministries are an attempt from this congregation as a community reach out to the community around us. Our Free Food Mondays are our way of helping those who need just a bit more help, so we give them some food. We reach out to North Presbyterian Church because it has a unique ministry to the homeless with again food but also worship and support. We encourage education with our support of Dougbe School in Africa when we attend the Gala or pray for them. We value families when we support our own community through Sunday School and Youth Group. We strive to be the best we can be as a community when we personally attend worship, Sunday School, and Bible Study.

Community at its best is a community that strives to help others in ways great and small. A community seeks to invite others to join in, so that all our gifts and abilities can be used for the glory of God. No person is left behind. Everyone has something to contribute. Even the widow’s mite has power.

When we come together, we can accomplish great things. We can make our communities stronger, safer, and more just.

No pastor can shape people like the sacrament of the Lord’s supper and a Spirit-filled community. So let us all commit to building strong and vibrant communities. Let us reach out to our neighbors and friends. Let us volunteer our time and talents. And let us work together to make the world a better place. Amen.