

TRADITIONS AND CELEBRATIONS

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We all have them ... traditions, that is.

We all have them. In our families, we have them. We have traditions around important events: birthdays, Christmas, other holidays, the birth of a baby, the death of a loved one. We have traditions around everyday events: cleaning the house, going to school, going to the dentist, living in marriage, going on vacation, where we sit at the dinner table.

In my family, we have a traditional birthday meal: chicken, noodles and mashed potatoes. Every birthday, every one eats of the meal: a roasted chicken with mashed potatoes and egg noodles, preferably homemade egg noodles. And it's a favorite. It's a tradition passed through my mother's family and one that my husband has adopted ... thank goodness, because he cooks just like my mother and my grandmother before her. We all want to marry someone who cooks just like good 'ol mom ... well, in my children's case; they want to marry someone who cooks like dear ol' dad.

In Brent's tradition, the birthday meal is a lot different ... boiled potatoes that you mash on your plate, lettuce on top of the potatoes, crumbled-up side pork, sliced hard-boiled eggs and then a milk gravy. Apparently this is a meal that is very traditional for Dutch families ... and very special for my husband's Dutch family. The first time I ate it, I thought, 'they made this up ... they can't really be serious.' Brent and his brothers sat at the table with their knives and their forks and their napkins tucked in ... just waiting for their mother to deliver this odd assortment of food to the dinner table. I then got my hands on an old Dutch cookbook and there was, in black and white, an established dinner time ritual and tradition. It's called borenspiels.

I've certainly noticed in my lifetime that traditions involve food. I think most families have adopted traditions especially around dinner time. One of our traditions, passed

down from both my family and Brent's family: it's not so much what we eat, it's that we eat together. This helps define and shape our family identity.

We know where we sit, what time we eat and what is expected of us at the dinner table. It's not just meal-time etiquette. It's tradition.

Effective family traditions promote a sense of identity and a feeling of closeness, a sense of security and assurance in today's fast, hectic, and ever-changing world. As family bonds are weakened by busy lifestyles, families stay connected only by being intentional about maintaining important traditions. That's why dinner time is so very important in my family.

What about church traditions? Do we stay connected by being intentional about maintaining important traditions? Yes and no. Let me see if I can shed some light on that.

Every year I ask confirmation students to define tradition. The answers vary: a way of worship, a way of doing church, a set of values, an identity marker, a way to celebrate rituals, what we do when we gather every week for worship.

And then I ask them to describe a church tradition. Here's what they came up with this year:

Our children lead the Lord's Prayer.

We baptize babies.

We confirm 9th graders.

We sing old hymns.

We know the doxology by heart.

We celebrate Holy Communion once a month.

And then I ask: And why do we do these things? So that people know we are the Sun Prairie United Methodist Church. So people know we are Christians by our love and by our actions. So that God knows we're faithful.

The church, we believe is based on tradition. Actually, historically, we are based on a non-traditional movement so radical and so extreme that the world was turned upside down. We are based on a revolutionary faction. Throughout the ages, what we have come to know as tradition was actually dictated by revolutionary movements.

The first rebel: Jesus. In the Gospels, what does Jesus despise? Hypocrites. Who are the hypocrites? The traditionalists ... the Pharisees, the respected and revered religious leaders of Palestine. And what does Jesus do? He completely does away with the religious traditions of his day. And those who were faithful to the law and to the religious leaders were angry and scared. And sometimes we forget that.

In the 1500's who speaks out against corruption of the Roman church? Martin Luther. If he hadn't stepped away from tradition, we wouldn't be here today.

In the 1700's who speaks out against corruption and dis-ease in the Anglican Church? John Wesley. If he hadn't stepped away from tradition, we wouldn't be here today.

There are, of course, many others in the recent past, who have helped shape our identity into what and who we are today because they moved away from established tradition.

Tradition helps define and shape our identity. This is obviously very important. I don't want to be anything other than United Methodist. I love being United Methodist and I hope that's obvious ... but I don't want it to stop there. I don't think God wants it to stop there.

My son John played t-ball couple years back and we attended his games. At several of the games we sat with another couple whose son also played. The dad, after discovering

that I was a pastor (actually surprised that I was the pastor, and Brent wasn't) asked me, "Do you have a traditional church?" I didn't answer ... I was trying to process the question. "Do you have traditional worship?" Again, I didn't answer, as I was trying to come up with an answer that would please both of us. "Well, do you worship a traditional God, you know, like you're supposed to?" I did have an answer then: "I hope not." He was surprised. "Well, I guess your church isn't the church for my family."

How was I supposed to answer? We are a denomination that believes God is still acting in creation. We are a denomination that believes God is still speaking. We are the church of Jesus Christ that believes God is constantly forming and reforming the church's traditions of faith in response to the needs of the world in which we live.

I ask confirmation youth about tradition in the church because I want to know what they're saying. I want to know what they are experiencing. And I want to know what they are expecting. "We sing old hymns" ... isn't that a funny answer. I don't think we sing old hymns but to those almost 30 yrs younger than me, we sing old hymns. "We know the doxology by heart" ... Times change. That's not the doxology I learned as a youth, but to them, we've been singing our current arrangement most of their lives. "We baptize babies" ... well, that's a relatively new idea in the history of the church ... The early church would have never dreamed of baptizing babies! How can babies understand the grace of God through baptism? It used to be adults only!

Traditions change. The church changes. We change. It's apart of living, I guess. Things change If the church doesn't change, how can we reach out into the world which is under constant change?

I think what I really want to say, is, let's not base our faith only on tradition. Because we're non-traditional. Maybe you've never thought of it like that, but I'm thinking its okay. And I think its okay with God, too.

We celebrate an open table, believing that at the time of communion, it is God who welcomes us, invites us and feeds us and all, everyone, is invited to share in the meal. Everyone, literally everyone in the whole world is invited to dine with us during Holy Communion. **That's** radical.

We celebrate that God calls both men and women to the ministry. Thank the Lord, or else I wouldn't be here today. That's pretty radical and not at all very traditional.

We've come a long way, but we still have a long way to go. God is still creating and God is still speaking. Let the church in remembering Jesus remember the most revolutionary force in all of human history. For it was Jesus who crossed every boundary and broke down every barrier. The world could do with a lot more of this kind of revolutionary force. We live in a world and in a church that is slowed down because of sexism and racism and the abuse of the poor. We exploit and exterminate the natural world around us. We persecute people and judge lives that are different than ours. We have a long way to go. The world could do with a lot more of Jesus.

Let's celebrate being the church of Jesus Christ, understanding that maybe it is tradition that brings us together, but it is our identity and our faithfulness and our willingness to let God continue to mold us, that keeps us coming back. It's believing that God's going to use us to change the world that keeps us coming back. Maybe we just need to be reminded of that. God is going to use YOU to change the world. That's pretty radical.

Can I get an AMEN to that? AMEN!