

PILGRIM C H U R C H

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

THE VALUE OF TRADITION

Luke 2:41-52 December 27, 2009

Pilgrim Bud Precise

There is great value in tradition. Tradition is to bring life. But right off, I want to say that sometimes the tradition becomes so hardened that it shuts life up instead of letting it expand. Then it must be broken though to a new way. I believe that old customs should be reverently carried on. Yet, every rite points to life. When it fails to do that – then the spirit must seek expression in some new and living way.

Remember FIDDLER ON THE ROOF?

A fiddler on the roof. Sounds crazy, no? But in our little village of Anatevka, you might say every one of us is a fiddler on the roof, trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his neck. It isn't easy. You may ask, why do we stay here if it's so dangerous. We stay here because Anatevka is our home. And how do we keep our balance. That I can tell you in a word. Tradition! We have a tradition for everything – how to eat, how to sleep, how to wear clothes. For instance, we always keep our heads covered and always wear a little prayer shawl. This shows our constant devotion to God. You may ask, how did this tradition start? I'll tell you – I don't know. But it is a tradition. Because of our traditions, everyone knows who he is and what God expects him to do. Tradition. Without our traditions, our lives would be a shaky as – as a fiddler on the roof!

The early church appears to have no interest in the life of Jesus before he emerges as a teacher. It preserved no tradition of his boyhood, apart from this one incident of the journey of the family to Jerusalem. When Jesus is twelve, the family makes what is probably an annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Festival of Passover.

From the story, Jesus is allowed a measure of independence. The family travels with others. The pilgrimage is required of males, but most of the time the women went along. There is not reason to assume that is the first time Jesus has made this trip with the family. On the return trip home, Mary and Joseph suppose Jesus to be with others traveling in their party. The story is not about bad parents. Once they discover Jesus is not among them, they return to Jerusalem and search for him. They find him in the temple. He is listening to the teachers and asking questions. That tells me that the synagogue Jesus attended have given him the best gift a school can give – the desire to learn more. How does one learn? We listen. We ask questions. Jesus is found in the temple learning – he is asking questions and listening to the teachers. His parents expressed their concern that they could not find him. Jesus goes back home with them to Nazareth. The text says he was obedient to them. And he grew in favor with God and people in his community.

Jesus was a child of tradition. He was presented at the temple when he was eight days old and now he is attending Passover. On a trip back to Nazareth as a young man, he “attended synagogue worship – as was his tradition.” Tradition is important. The words of Jesus are, “Think not that I came to abolish the law and the prophets.” Jesus knew the importance of tradition.

Jesus also called tradition to task when it no longer led to life. He challenged the traditions of the Sabbath. He chided those who kept the tradition of being very careful to wash eating utensils while ignoring what they put in their bodies and minds. He called the established religion of his day to remember the words of the prophets that called on them to include the widows, the orphans and the aliens.

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I like reading the words in the text today that Jesus grew in wisdom. Jesus had to learn just like we do. And Jesus grew – just like us – from childhood to adulthood. And Jesus grew in favor with God and with the people in his community. That is the Jesus I can follow. Growing in favor with the community means that people were happy to see him coming. He must have made life brighter among those he lived with.

It is the only story we have of the childhood of Jesus. Here we find him, with his family celebrating the festival of Passover. It is a tradition that helps him know who he is and what God and his community expects of him. Sometimes we fuss about tradition. Sometimes tradition stifles us and causes us to not become our best. But traditions can be changed. The traditions of our lives are like the traditions of Anatevka. They help us keep our balance. The traditions we teach our children about the importance of sharing, telling the truth, being considerate of others – they are important. The tradition of keeping Sabbath helps us remember who we are in relation to God and our community. The tradition of volunteering, of sharing our knowledge and resources with others is important. I believe that a child that grows up in Sunday School learns a set of values from the tradition of our faith that will serve them well all of their lives.

Tradition. It is important when it opens life to us and those about us. It can help us grow in favor with God and with community. Otherwise, our life would be precarious, well, like a fiddler of the roof.