

A Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Trinity, August 27, 2006

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In the epistle, St. Paul says, “I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received.” This is language that describes the handing down of authoritative tradition. St. Paul did not invent the death and resurrection of Jesus. St. Paul received this teaching from Christ or the other apostles. And he delivered this teaching to the Corinthians. St. Paul was a steward and herald of this teaching tradition.

This is the vocation of the apostolic ministry. We do not make up the content of the faith. We receive the teaching tradition from the previous generation, which received it in line of succession tracing back to the apostles. It is our vocation to deliver the apostolic teaching to those to whom God sends us. We are stewards and heralds of the tradition.

Paul highlights three things: Jesus died for our sins, was buried and rose from the dead. We can see here the seeds of the Apostles’ and Nicene creeds: The creedal statements about Jesus developed backwards in time to describe just who this is who died and rose. The creedal statements developed forward in time to tell us what happened after the Resurrection and what is yet to happen. This is the revealed faith that has been handed down to us. This is the “tradition.”

This authentic tradition stands in contrast with other things that are sometimes thought of as tradition. This tradition is not the same thing as the way things have always been done in a particular church. Often, “the way things have always been done” is really only the way things were done in a given place for the last 40 or 50 years. And, often, the way things were done in a given church for the last 40 or 50 years is different from the way things have been done in the universal church for 2,000 years.

We could cite specific examples such as candle usage and placement, choir location, vestment styles, hymns or particular liturgical customs. The point is this. We ought always to fight our main battles over the authentic tradition St. Paul is talking about. Lines should be drawn over the issues of who Jesus is and what he did and is doing for us. Errors with regard to this tradition threaten our salvation.

But we ought to exercise charity in matters concerning non-essential traditions for these, too, can affect our salvation, but in a different way. We won’t be harmed spiritually because a particular non-essential thing isn’t done *my* way. But we will be harmed spiritually if we allow differences of opinion on non-essential things to make us uncharitable, angry or malicious. There is great opportunity for spiritual growth when we learn to deal charitably with perspectives that are different from our own on non-essential matters.

There is another thing that stands in contrast with the tradition: My personal opinion. Today, people do not tend to think of faith in terms of acceptance of the tradition. When asked to express their faith, many people will give a litany of personal opinions, some of which agree and some of which depart from the authentic tradition. It is a sort of supermarket approach—selecting the products one wants and leaving behind the products one does not want.

However, there is no sense in Paul's language that his hearers could choose to accept some parts of what he received and delivered to them but not other parts. This is one of the greatest challenges to faith in our culture. Every day, in almost every venue, we are told that our personal choice is sovereign. We can customize our cell phones, our computers and our clothing. We can choose what we watch and what we buy. Why can't we customize our faith?

To be sure, there are optional things. Certain kinds of prayer fit certain personalities and there are certain kinds of spiritual reading that one can choose by temperament. But the main points of morality, doctrine and practice cannot be customized because they are what they are. Our thoughts and opinions about them do not change the truth.

This is where humility comes in. The ability to make choices about everything in life can lead us to think that everything really depends upon us, that we are at the center of the universe. This is the sin of pride. To respond with faith to the tradition requires humility. We must lay aside our objections and opinions to the contrary. We must realize that we are not the center of the universe. We must change to conform ourselves to God's truth.

A genuine encounter with Christ produces humility. Paul was humbled by his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road. He writes in the epistle, "Last of all he was seen by me, as of one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles that am not worthy to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God."

When Jesus appeared to Paul, Paul was forced to adjust his perspectives and opinions to this new revelation. The change in Paul was the change from Pharisee to publican in our gospel parable. Previously, he had been certain of his own rightness and righteousness. After he saw Jesus, it was, "God be merciful to me, a sinner."

A faith that is rooted too much in "the way we always did it," or in "What *I* think about God," leads us to pride. We become pre-occupied with secondary things or enamored with our own train of thought. A faith that is rooted in Jesus Christ produces humility. Faith becomes all about him and not about us.

The liturgy highlights the fixed nature of the authentic tradition. The liturgy presents to us things as they are. It does not present to us a series of choices or entertainments that depend upon our response. The liturgy presents to us Christ who died for our sins and rose from the dead. We can either enter into the liturgy with our hearty "Amen," or we can reject the liturgy and its message. But we cannot change it; we cannot make it what we would rather have it be.

This is good news because it means that our salvation does not depend upon our ever-changing feelings and opinions. Our salvation depends upon the truths that have been delivered to us, upon Jesus Christ, who died for our sins according to the Scriptures, who was buried and who rose again the third day and was seen by many. As St. Paul says, "So we preach and so ye believed."