

“Traditions, Traditionalism, and Change”

Acts 22:1-11, 17-22/Mark 3:1-6

August 30, 2026

1st Presbyterian Church of Sharon

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I. Introduction

Tradition. I invite you to wonder a little about tradition this morning. And so you may be thinking about the musical “Fiddler on the Roof” and the song “Tradition.”

“Tradition.” By now you may be ready to get up, dance and sing. “Fiddler on the Roof” is about traditions and change. The musical takes place in a small Jewish village in Russia. It is the early 20th century. The lead character, Tevye, a poor dairy farmer, is trying to raise his 5 daughters according to Jewish tradition. But the 3 older daughters rebel against marriage according to a traditional match maker and instead want to marry according to love. And an even bigger change is coming when the Russian pogroms force the Jews in the village to leave. The symbolic “fiddler on the roof,” however, leaves with them, suggesting that the traditions will move to new locations.

Tradition. I also thought of Bob Dylan’s song from 1964, “The Times They Are a Changin.’ ”

“Come gather 'round people/Wherever you roam/Admit that the waters/Around you have grown/And accept it that soon/You'll be drenched to the bone

If your time to you/Is worth savin'/Then you better start swimmin'/Or you'll sink like a stone/For the times they are a changin.’ ”

Traditions and change. That was the 60s for Dylan’s song. There was a lot of change to traditions. But that’s also the story of human culture: traditions and change. It’s just in some seasons the change comes faster and is more disruptive.

As I was reading through, studying, and thinking about the texts from the Bible this past week, traditions and change came to mind. Or more precisely, tradition, traditionalism, and change with Christian faith.

One day this past week when Bill and I were talking we discussed sermons. Most sermons end with a clear point or answer. And if preached well it’s easy to understand what the sermon is about. There’s a conclusion. But there are also sermons that are different. They are not so much about a clear answer, but rather a vexing question. And these sermons invite us to wonder. It’s a little like Jesus when he tells open-ended parables and invites hearers to wonder

and finish them themselves. So this sermon is like that. If I've done a good job, it will invite us to wonder a little about Christian faith, tradition, traditionalism, and change.

II. Text and Brief Exegesis

Jesus was raised in a very traditional and pious Jewish home. He was circumcised. His family observed the Sabbath and followed dietary laws. He studied the Torah and when he was old enough went to the synagogue. He attended religious festivities in Jerusalem. He practiced prayer and giving to the poor. Some biblical theologians have wondered if Jesus might have had some training as a rabbi. In many ways he was a deeply traditional Jewish male in the 1st C. And Jesus valued those traditions and the history of his people with God.

But in all that, Jesus is about something more and deeper. He's about a real relationship with the living God. He's about living out the most important laws of loving God and neighbor. And he's about how those deeper things address people and life situations now. "Traditionalists" value the religious traditions the most. Jesus valued loving God and neighbor the most. The traditions were a way to experience God and God's way. But the traditions were not God. Jesus was traditional. But he was not a traditionalist.

And so we see all of this happening in the story from Mark 3. It's the Sabbath so Jesus attends a synagogue where he would share in reading and discussing the Torah and prayer. He values the tradition. But more than that he loves God and neighbor. And so he believes on the Sabbath you do good, not harm, you save life, not kill. Jesus' primary faithfulness is to God and not the Sabbath traditions. He's about the reordering of what's most important and change. So the man is healed. But the "traditionalists" are livid. In fact, they are so angry they want to destroy Jesus and his ministry and his message. To them the tradition is everything and they cannot see the activity of God in their midst.

We can see the same thing happening in our story from Acts 22. The mission to the gentiles has grown. More gentiles become Christians. And it has caused a divide in the Church as great as the Grand Canyon. On the one side are the Jewish Christians who believed you need to become Jewish, practice some of the traditions, and believe that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah. On the other side are Paul, some Jewish Christians, and gentile Christians who believed that salvation for everyone was based on God's grace in Jesus Christ received by faith. Traditions are not necessary. So it's "traditionalists" vs change. The separation between the two groups had become deep and volatile.

In the story Paul has come to Jerusalem at the end of his 3rd mission journey. He's come to try to build a bridge between the two sides. But when he's recognized at the temple things explode. A riot ensues. Roman soldiers are dispatched to stop the riot. Paul is arrested. Paul then claims his Roman citizenship and is allowed to address the crowd. Speaking Hebrew, the language of Jewish culture and religion and tradition, the crowd quiets to listen to Paul.

In Paul's long speech a couple of things stand out. First, like Jesus, Paul points out that he was raised in Jewish traditions. He was born a Jew. He studied in Jerusalem under the great rabbi Gamaliel. He strictly followed the traditions and was serious about his faith. In fact, he was so serious about the Jewish traditions he sought out Jewish Christians and had them arrested for breaking the traditions. And he was so committed to their religious traditions he worked for the chief priest and elders in Jerusalem, the center of tradition. Paul was an extreme traditionalist.

But then it all changes. He has an experience with the risen Jesus Christ. He hears Christ's voice and is told to go to Damascus. Blind from the brightness of the light Paul is led to Damascus. There his sight is restored, he's given the commission of being a witness to Jesus in all the world, and he's baptized into the Christian Church he once persecuted.

Up until now the crowd listened to Paul. But when he then mentions that he was sent by God to the gentiles the riot again explodes. Like the story about Jesus' healing in the synagogue on the Sabbath, the traditionalists in this story also cannot see the work of God in their midst. Like Jesus, Paul was raised in the traditions, but is not a traditionalist.

III. Brief Reflection

Retired Executive Presbyter Dave Dawson told this joke many times: How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb? What? Change????

Indeed, that is true for any particular Christian denomination, and I would think any religion, when you have some history. Because what I think happens is that questions about faith become beliefs, and beliefs become practices, and practices become the tradition of the religion. And at one time the practices expressed faithfulness in a cultural context. But then the context changes, history happens, and the practice doesn't fit so well anymore. And so some people, the traditionalists, cling to the traditions. And they believe that's what it is to be faithful. While others value the traditions but look for what the deeper traditions say about God and faith and living as a human being today. And they are open to change. An example would be church music. The Reformed Presbyterian Church sings only the Psalms acapella. That's it. Just like John Calvin's 16th C Geneva Church. While here at 1st Church we sing all types of songs and hymns, with all types of musical accompaniment.

For over 40 years as a pastor I've wondered about this: traditions, traditionalism, and change. Presbyterians have lots of traditions. So I wondered which traditions in theology and practice have a deeper value to carry forward, which do not, and how do you decide. I can tell you it's not always easy. Here at 1st Church, I've appreciated the staff and church leaders that have wondered about that with me. By and large we don't do things because they are fad. Nor do we do things because "we've always done it that way." Rather we do things because we believe they are faithful to our deeper tradition and theology, and they have value today.

An example would be worship. We have a generally traditional worship service. But to that service we add different types of music, different ways of doing a sermon, different ways of

sharing communion, and different ways of doing the children's message. Some Sundays we change up the liturgy some. We have Jazz Sunday. The deeper tradition is inviting people into the worship of God today, so we are open to some changes.

Another example would be mission. There was a day when mission tradition was donating money to support the missionaries. And while some of that is still true, mission today is also meeting needs in our community ourselves, supporting local missions and going on brief mission trips. The deeper tradition is said well by our mission statement: "Meeting Jesus on the Corner of Faith and Life," and we do that in different ways.

Another example would be hospitality. There was a day when people just went to church. It was a type of cultural tradition. And churches tended to separate into socio-economic classes, races and education levels. But today that has changed. People just don't go to church. Roughly only 31% of the American population are in church on a Sunday. Believing that the grace of God in Jesus Christ is for all people, we work so that everyone feels welcome. The noisy greetings at the beginning of worship service and sitting with different people at church meals and wearing name tags the 2nd Sunday of the month are no small things. It's our vision statement: "Deep Well; No Fences."

Tradition, traditionalism, and change. Maybe it's a little like this. There was a day when stores and restaurants were in downtown Sharon. It was the tradition. But then things happened. Some stores and restaurants moved out to Hermitage. The traditionalists thought it was crazy. But it became a tradition. And then the Mall was built. And again, the traditionalists thought it was crazy. But it became the tradition. And then times changed again. So the Mall came down. And new stores and restaurants are being built there: Target, Chick Filet, Longhorn Steakhouse and Meijers. And once again the traditionalists think it's crazy. But like what's happened before, the change will become the new tradition.

Tradition, traditionalism, and change; and so we wonder about Christian faith and 1st Presbyterian Church. We are not traditionalists who just keep doing something because we've always done it that way. Rather we value our deep theological tradition and are committed to it. Sometimes that means we keep doing things a certain way because we believe it's the faithful thing for people today. And sometimes that means we change because we believe that's better for people today. But always we're wondering about tradition, traditionalism, and change and what it means to be faithful to our Presbyterian theological tradition and faithful to Jesus Christ.

And so, as I said, there is not one clear point, one clear answer in this sermon. And I think that is ok. Rather it is an invitation to a question: how might we keep wondering about Christian faith, tradition, traditionalism, and change? And personally I can say sometimes I feel myself to be Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof." But I'm singing Bob Dylan; "The times, they are a changin'."