



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

Tradition and the Individual Soul

Sermon for the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost, October 16, 2016

Readings: Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 119:97-104; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

Sermon text: Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. Luke 18:1

I feel whipsawed by the readings, caught between prophet and apostle.

In the first, the prophet Jeremiah sends a message of consolation from God to the people of Israel and Judah captive in Babylon and scattered in exile. I will replant what I have plucked up, says the Lord, I will rebuild what has been torn down. No longer will the sins of the fathers be visited upon the children, but each person will be responsible for their own actions. Finally, I will rebuild in a new way, with a new covenant. Not like the old one, written on tablets of stone, but I will write a new covenant in the hearts of the people. The people will not need to be taught to know the Lord, because everyone will know God “from the least to the greatest.” Sins will be forgiven; iniquity set right. It’s all good. A message of great comfort and joy to a people in deep darkness and despair.

In the second, Paul writes to his young disciple Timothy concerning how to teach and manage the church where he has been placed in charge by Paul. Apparently, some older men are refusing to accept Timothy’s authority. Others have radically different ideas about the meaning of “Christ event.” The picture is not a peaceful Quaker meeting, in which everyone’s Inner Light leads to Spirit-led consensus, but is more like the tribal anarchy described at the end of the book of Judges, where terrible acts are being committed and old alliances broken because “everyone does what is right in his own eyes.”

Be strong, Paul writes to Timothy. “Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” Paul continues with a phrase that has been a core text of those who uphold biblical authority ever since: “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

Hold on to sound teaching, maintain your composure, do not give in to those clamoring for change in doctrine—as if every one had a law written in their own heart, a voice of God whispering in their inner ear. They deceive themselves and others, for “having itching

ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.”

Who do you prefer, Jeremiah or Paul? Tradition or inspiration? Religion or spirituality? Or is there a third party candidate?

In a famous essay by T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot argues that each new talent emerges from a rich tradition of English, Western and world literature and culture. The true original is not the one who strives to be original, but the one who makes us all see the past tradition in a new way. Each new talent changes and rearranges the way we understand her predecessors. Writing in 1919, as modernism exploded in all the arts (and in his own poetry, such as *The Wasteland*), he argued that “what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the new (the really new) work of art among them.”

Bob Dylan, newly selected Nobel laureate in literature, is a case in point. He himself burst onto the music and folk and cultural scene in the early 1960s. He has remained incredibly creative, and each decade somewhat uniquely different. Now a distinguished elder, he has spoken about how his early songs came out of a deep tradition:

“I'm glad for my songs to be honored like this. But you know, they didn't get here by themselves. It's been a long road and it's taken a lot of doing. These songs of mine, I think of as mystery plays, the kind that Shakespeare saw when he was growing up. I think you could trace what I do back that far. They were on the fringes then, and I think they're on the fringes now. And they sound like they've been traveling on hard ground.

...There's nothing secret about it. You just do it subliminally and unconsciously, because that's all enough, and that's all you know. That was all that was dear to me. They were the only kinds of songs that made sense. "When you go down to Deep Ellum keep your money in your socks / Women on Deep Ellum put you on the rocks." Sing that song for a while and you just might come up with, "When you're lost in the rain in Juarez and it's Easter time too / And your gravity's down and negativity don't pull you through / Don't put on any airs / When you're down on Rue Morgue Avenue / They got some hungry women there / And they really make a mess outta you." (From his speech accepting a MusiCares award in 2015; read the whole thing [here](#)).

Well, you know me, I had to get Dylan in after his award (with another favorite, T.S. Eliot). But they both say much the same thing: artistic creativity is a matter of absorbing a tradition, consciously and unconsciously, and speaking your own word. And so the tradition grows and old songs are heard in new ways.

Does religious tradition develop in a similar way? I think so. New voices from within the tradition, and unfamiliar perspectives from outside, change our understanding who God is. We hear the parables afresh, add new songs to the hymnal.

You can debate whether this is due to the Holy Spirit leading us into truth we weren't ready to bear in earlier times, or the result of people with itching ears eager to hear self-proclaimed prophets promote cleverly devised myths. Probably both. What is certain is that our highly individualistic western culture promotes synergistic spiritual journeys. What used to be a narrow menu of major religions has

become a world buffet with many local regional cuisines. In many ways we have returned to the context of Paul and Timothy, the exuberant religious marketplace of late antiquity.

The result is a new narrative of faith journeys: I was born a Jew, but became a Buddhist; I started as a Catholic, became an Evangelical, ended an Atheist. We are all searching, even those of us who have decided to dig deep in a certain tradition, as I have in Christianity. Many don't like to get stuck in boxes and answer none of the above; hence the refrain, I am spiritual but not religious.

But this is not really new. Christian tradition includes a stream of individualistic piety. Just as we can see Roman Catholic respect for the authority of tradition, of apostolic succession, in Paul's charge to Timothy; and support for the Reformation doctrine of the inerrancy of scripture in his remark on the inspiration of scripture; so we can see inner light and pentecostal forms of Christianity growing out of Jeremiah's prophecy of a new law written on the individual heart. We can also see Enlightenment rationalism enriching natural theology, especially, I think, in the Anglican tradition.

And because I see the Christian tradition as pluralistic, inclusive and developing in each generation, my answer to the earlier question is not either/or; not religion versus spirituality; not just obedience to infallible tradition or inerrant scriptural authority versus an inner light, pentecostal sort of faith; but a both/and. In the Anglican/Episcopal model, tradition, scripture, and reason work together to form the individual conscience. Each generation, as it retells the stories and parables, interpreting them within a changing cultural context, in conversation with other traditions and new discoveries, reshapes how we understand tradition and the word of God.

Have faith, Jesus said. Trust that God is just and loving, at work even now in bringing the kingdom life home. God is at work, slowly carving the law of love into the rocky heart of humanity, generation after generation. And God is at work, slowly carving the law of love into your heart, throughout your lifetime.

And part of the process is immersion in tradition, in scripture and perennial wisdom, in ethics and practice. In learning how each culture has its own gifts and blind spots; how our gifts might work together to make the world better. How to resist both the tyranny of conformity to false teaching and tradition, cultural conformity, and the foolishness of naively trusting in an untutored heart and mind. We are in this together: God and us, you and me.

Let us pray always and not lose heart.

In Christ's name, Amen.

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