



Sermon of October 3, 1999



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"USES OF THE PAST"

Philippians 3:4b-16

There is a man in New York who has gained notoriety because he refuses to join the 20th century. In a few months he will refuse to join the 21st century. He wears high button shoes, and Prince Albert coats. He has mutton chop sideburns, and a handlebar moustache. He lives in a garret in Greenwich Village. He reads Dickens and *Jane Eyre*, only 19th century novels, and shuns all the things he can that have been manufactured in the 20th century.

Now my children, and certain members of this staff, accuse me of wanting to go back to the 19th century. And I am offended that they would suggest that. I don't want to go back to the 19th century. The 18th century, I think, is where I belong. I am reading a fascinating book now about the early Middle Ages, and I am kind of attracted to that now, too.

The fact is that every individual, and especially every institution, has to face that question. Will

they be oriented to the past, or to the future? Another way to put it is, do we find our meaning in tradition, or in innovation? Do we find it in permanence or change. Which way leads to life?

I found our text for this morning from Philippians an interesting help in discussing that question. Paul is writing to the Philippians because he has received a letter from them. In the letter they ask a number of questions, specifically, "What about these Judaizers?" That's what they called them.

"Judaizers" we could designate as conservative Christians, who wanted to keep Christianity the way it was, keep it tied to Judaism. They reasoned that Jesus was the Messiah. The Messiah came for the Jews. Therefore to be a Christian, you had to first become a Jew.

Paul disagreed. His whole career had been based on the belief that Jesus came for everybody, not just for the Jews. You didn't have to become a Jew to become a Christian. The Council of Jerusalem, the first council of the Church, all the apostles gathered there, agreed with Paul, that this wonderful new thing had happened, and the covenant is now open to everyone, Christ has come for everyone.

They ordained Paul to preach this good news to the Gentiles. But there were those who disagreed. They followed Paul all around the Mediterranean, to all of his churches. Paul would move on from a church, and they would move in, contradict him.

They were called Judaizers, but Paul called them something else. You can see that at the beginning of this passage. Actually it's not in this passage. The lectionary people decided it was too "raw" for Methodist congregations. He called them "dogs." That's what he called them. You can translate that as freely as you want to get his drift.

Paul obviously has had enough of these Judaizers. He is at the end of his career. He is in prison, as a matter of fact. He knows that he is not going to get out of there. So he is approaching the end of his life. And here comes a letter saying, "There's some people here who are saying that what you have taught us is just wrong. They are saying we have to be circumcised. We have to become Jews."

Paul can't believe it. Even at this hour, they won't give up. Even as he is in a state of extremity, they have no respect, no consideration for what it is that he is going through. So he writes the letter to the Philippians to answer the charges.

Notice how he does it. He compares himself with the Judaizers. He says that he is more Jewish than they are. He gives his credentials. And what's more, he says, he is proud of his Jewishness. He is not going to give it up because it was something less than satisfying to him. It was enormously satisfying to him. But he has given it up for the "surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ as Lord."

What he writes next must be conditioned by what he is going through. It must be on his mind that he is approaching the end of his life, because he writes, "I want to know Christ now and the power of his resurrection."

That's what he is focused on now, the hope of resurrection. It is as if he journeyed to this point in his life, to the end of his life, following Jesus all these years, all his adult life. Now he has come to the same suffering that Jesus had known, and he is still following. Jesus has been his guide through all the stages of life. He follows Jesus now into the last stage of life, to face his death. He writes, "I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection, and the sharing of his sufferings, by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may thereby attain resurrection from the dead."

That's Paul's view of faith. It's following Jesus through all of the stages of our journey: youth, adulthood, and into the close of life. Looking always to the future. Following Jesus as he takes us into the future. Not trying to stay behind where we want to be, but willingly move with him, to where God is leading us. It is not meeting certain requirements or laws. That's not what Christianity is about. It's not about believing this, or obeying this. That's not what it is about.

For Paul, Christianity is this wild and unpredictable adventure, which for him began in Damascus when he experienced the grace of Christ through the love of a Christian, named Anasias, who forgave Paul for his persecuting the Christians. Paul couldn't get over that. Paul said, "I now cast aside all that I achieved, all this security, all this certainty in my life, put it behind me, to start a journey with Christ."

And he never settled down, not physically, or spiritually. His life is a journey, following Jesus to the end. Even now he says, my journey isn't finished. He is still following. This is amazing. He is still growing. He is still maturing. Sitting there in jail waiting for the end, he is still moving. He writes, "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached my goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own."

Paul has made it impossible for any Christian to hold to a sedentary religion, a religion that clings to the past, that finds its security in a temple, or in a creed, or in a belief, or in a ritual, or in an immutable code of law. That's what he meant when he said to the Galatians, "Christ has made you free. So don't submit again to a yoke of slavery." That is, don't be tied down to something that is permanent, and immovable, and infallible, and absolute. Christian faith is not tied down to any law, or ritual, or tradition, or any institution. We are tied to Christ as Lord. So don't expect Christ to be a doctrine in the past. Christ, Paul says, is a presence leading us into the future. And the church that does not learn that lesson will find itself a mausoleum.

Rod Wilmoth, pastor of the Hennepin Avenue Church in Minneapolis, tells of visiting an historic church in Cincinnati. He wanted to see it, it was a famous church. He found the church. It was run down, paint peeling, closed up tight. He couldn't get in. He found the sexton, who agreed to open it up for him.

They went into the sanctuary, cavernous, old, dark, musty. "Who comes here?" he asked. The old man said, "Not many anymore. If it weren't for visitors, there probably wouldn't be any at all."

Then he mentioned to follow. They went down a dark corridor to the entrance of a tunnel. They walked down the dirt floor of the tunnel into a room with a dirt floor and dirt walls, but a ceiling of reinforced concrete. The sexton asked, "Do you know where you are?"

He said, "No. I have no idea where I am."

"You are standing in the old church cemetery. A few years ago the city told us we had to have off-street parking. The only place that we could do that was behind the church where the cemetery was. So we moved all the caskets, poured the concrete. That's the parking lot above your head."

Then with great excitement the sexton went over to a hole in the dirt wall. He reached his hand in and pulled out a human leg bone. He walked over to Rod Wilmoth, held the bone close so that he could see it in the dim light, and said, "Isn't this the most exciting thing that you have ever seen?"

A church that is tied to the past will in time become a graveyard. And the most exciting thing in that church will be the bones of its ancestors.

But that is not the whole story. I couldn't help but notice that Paul concludes our text by saying, "Let those of us who are mature be thus minded." Which means, if you are a mature Christian, Paul is saying that you are going to be like me, and you will be ready to give up the past and journey into the future with Christ. But then he adds this line. "Only let us hold on to what we have attained."

That is a fascinating line. In a letter in which all of his emotions seem to run over, a letter filled with crescendos of prose, mounting up, talking about "pressing on toward the goal of the upward call of Jesus Christ." Then he comes down to earth all of a sudden, as if he has forgotten something. He writes, "Let us hold on to what we have attained," as if his enthusiasm for pressing on to the future threatened to overwhelm another equally important concern.

So it is something like this. Mature Christians are those who move into the future in faith, but hold on to what they have attained. Which works out as a pretty healthy axiom, and a good guideline for the Church. Especially a church that is celebrating its 130th anniversary, at the threshold of a new millennium. So a word should be said, as well, for the past, for tradition. And I will say it categorically, you cannot be the Church without tradition.

Paul wrote differently to individual churches according their need. The Philippians were being led astray by Judaizers, those who would tie Christianity to a form in the past. So he told the Philippians, "You are free, free from the past. Look to the future." But the last thing that Paul would tell other churches, especially the Corinthians, is "you are free," because they were being led astray by those who we would call today promulgators of "feel good" religion and moral relativism. So his emphasis in Corinth is, you need roots, you need the tradition of the faith. He said to the Corinthians, "I pass on to you what I have received from the tradition."

But in Philippians that's a minor point. It is almost an after thought. But it is there, and that is what I want to point out to you. Mature Christians move into the future, but they hold on to what they have attained, to the tradition, as a guide.

That is what the Bible is for. The Bible is the foundation of our tradition. Some parts of the Bible are three thousand years old, and yet it speaks to us today. The doctrines of the Church, the

teachings of the Church, are the tradition. They are not infallible. They are like explorers' maps, drawn by those who have gone on before us into areas of life that we someday will journey ourselves.

Worship is part of the tradition. The Gospel is not tied to any particular form of worship. There have been hundreds of forms and rites of worship throughout the history of the Church. But the traditions that have conveyed the Gospel successfully for generations should not be tossed out simply because they are old.

And there is the witness of the saints, especially the witness of the saints. I point out to you that this is not only Anniversary Sunday, and not only World Communion Sunday, and not only Missions Sunday, this is also St. Francis Day in the liturgical churches.

I don't think you can be a Christian until you come to terms with the message of St. Francis. His followers founded this city. How can you live in San Diego and not know about St. Francis. There is no one whose life as a Christian speaks so eloquently to the spiritual vacuum of our time, especially the greed that is so rampant in our time, than St. Francis.

Or, the saints of this church. I was so pleased that we persisted in building the Memorial Garden, behind me here. It took seven or eight years of patience for us to finally achieve it. I go out there now, I walk through that Garden, and I know most of those people memorialized there. I can tell you wonderful stories of those people. Their lives are a part of the history, the tradition, of this church.

I hope someday the children from Sunday School will be taken there by a teacher, who will point to a name, and say, "Let me tell you of the faith of this person," "Let me tell you of the compassion of this person," "Let me tell you of the Christ-like spirit with which this person lived her life," so the children will know that Christian faith is not something that we manufacture out of our own experience, but it is a faith that has been handed to us in a community, a community that nurtures us in that faith.

And then maybe the teacher can bring those children into the sanctuary, and show them the symbols of that tradition. Especially the symbol before me of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who over two hundred years ago, like Paul, broke from petrified traditions that had turned churches into mausoleums and preached the good news to people in his day in new forms. So the tradition gave birth to the reformers. There isn't any reformation of the Church that was not inspired by the tradition. We cannot be Christian without tradition.

No where is that as true as it is with the sacraments, the oldest traditions that we have, back two thousand years, ordered by our Lord. This morning we celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion, the most precious tradition in the Church. Jesus told us to observe it regularly until he returns and we eat with him in his kingdom.

It is a wonderful example of what I have tried to say. This sacrament is both a looking back, a remembrance, and it is a looking ahead, to the end of history. It's an anticipation, a victory in Christ. Paul told the Corinthians, a church that was adrift in a pagan sea without a rudder, hold on to this, especially to the Lord's Supper. It will anchor you in the Gospel. Never let go of it.

He wrote, "For I received from the Lord what I now pass on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night that he was betrayed, took bread. And when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body, broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' The same way after the supper, he took the cup, and said, 'This is my blood of the new covenant, given for you. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me.'"

That's tradition. Passed on from the disciples who were there in the Upper Room, heard Jesus' voice. They told their churches. Churches told the next generation, all the way to this morning, where all around the world millions and millions of Christians are gathered around this Table to hear the words that our Lord actually spoke to you and to me. Because of that tradition we can sing,

Here, O my Lord, I see thee face to face;
Here would I touch and handle things unseen;
Here grasp with firmer hand eternal grace,
And all my weariness upon thee lean.

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
that we might be servants of others,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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