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11/01/2018 | Monthly Topic, Traditions

Traditions to break and create

by SommerAnn McCullough

Every year about this time, as I prepare for Thanksgiving and the rush of the Christmas season that is soon to follow, I look forward to the many traditions my family keeps. I love choosing the first Christmas playlist that we will listen to while preparing Thanksgiving dinner, snuggling up to watch "White Christmas" with our slices of pie after the dishes are done, and waking up early on the Friday after Thanksgiving to choose our Christmas tree.

And inevitably, as I've grown up, other traditions have changed or been broken. Going Black Friday shopping at midnight no longer holds the same appeal as it did when I was in high school, and I no longer countdown the days of Advent with pieces of chocolate.

There are some traditions that remain important and timely, and others that no longer bring me closer to my family or the teachings of Jesus during the Christmas season. In Luke's gospel, we see Jesus responding to traditions in two ways: breaking them to become closer to God, or starting new rituals to teach more about God's compassion.

In the sixth chapter of Luke, Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath, breaking a very important tradition held by the religious scholars of the time. Luke writes,

"On another sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come and stand here.' He got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, 'I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?' After looking around at all of them, he said to him, 'Stretch out your hand.' He did so, and his hand was restored." (Luke 6:6-10)

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We see Jesus standing in defiance of this tradition that the Pharisees and religious scholars kept, choosing to heal on the holy day of rest. In this instance, Jesus sees it as an act of good or evil: Do we preserve life or destroy it? Jesus understands that there is something more important here than the tradition of keeping the sabbath. He is choosing to break a well-regarded tradition to carry forth God's gospel and his power to heal lives.

Traditions for good or not-so-good

I think of harmful traditions around the Christmas season such as focusing too much on the shopping and the busyness, and less on the time of waiting and building community in Christ. I am guilty of finding myself caught-up in the whirlwind of gifts, parties and ugly Christmas sweaters and less on the reason people are coming together to celebrate the birth of Christ.

Each year, I try to create or add to a Christmas tradition that will bring me closer to God. Instead of filling my evenings with holiday parties, I try to attend my church's weekly Advent service. I've taken time from shopping and creating the perfect Christmas wish list to host a day of play for the children at my church to learn about the season of waiting. It's still a work in progress, but taking time to distance myself from traditions that distract me from Jesus makes me more calm, rooted and intentional during the weeks leading up to Christmas.

Even though Jesus broke with some of these traditions that stood in the way of him practicing God's teachings, he also created life-giving traditions that he shared with his disciples. One of the aspects I love about Luke's Gospel is how he shares these new traditions with us, describing Jesus' mercy and grace.

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Throughout the Gospel, we see how Jesus was brave enough to open his arms and welcome people that society deemed unclean or unworthy.

A memorable example is when Jesus chooses to break bread with the tax collector Zacchaeus. Even though his own disciples are grumbling that "He has gone to the be the guest of one who is a sinner" (Luke 19:7), Jesus knows we must break the traditions of social castes and classes to fully live into God's word and promise.

Jesus showed his disciples how powerful new traditions can be when they are started in God's name and with the purpose of becoming closer to God. This is only one of many occasions where Jesus shares intimate moments with society's outcasts and shows those around him how powerful it can be to live in acceptance and love.

When I think of new traditions I want to start or those I want to distance myself from, I find myself drawn back to Jesus' teachings and the example he set for us. Are there traditions I'm holding onto that aren't in alignment with Jesus' gospel of acceptance and grace? How can I create a new tradition that brings me closer to Jesus on my path of discipleship?

I hope that as we enter the holiday season, you find time to enjoy the traditions in your life while also forging new ones in Christian community. I pray that you create intentional space to ask yourself how the traditions you've kept are bringing you closer to Jesus, and the power to step away from those that are no longer serving you.

Traditions can be a beautiful way to come together, reminisce and enjoy each other's company this time of year. May Jesus guide you as you create community and live out the traditions that speak to you and your faith journey.

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Closing prayer

God, we pray to you as we enter this season of traditions. Let us remember your Son's teachings in all that we do, from preparing Thanksgiving meals and breaking bread together to choosing how to respond to the busyness around us. Strengthen us to question traditions that no longer serve your gospel, and to speak up when we know our actions aren't bringing love or acceptance to the community around us. May we continue to create new traditions that follow in the teachings of Jesus Christ, in His name we pray, Amen.

Discussion questions

1. What is your favorite Thanksgiving or Christmas season tradition?
2. Instead of focusing on holiday parties and shopping this year, what are three aspects of Advent you'd like to live into?
3. *What new traditions do you want to start that align with Jesus' teachings of acceptance and love?*



SommerAnn McCullough is a mission-driven professional who has worked in community nonprofits on Chicago's west side for the past five years. SommerAnn is a member of St. Luke's Lutheran Church of Logan Square, where she has served as the Women's Small Group Minister for the past four years.

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11/01/2018 | Faith Reflections, Traditions

Traditions

by *Becca Ehrlich*

When I was a girl, my family and I had the annual tradition of trimming the Christmas tree together. We would put Christmas music on, drink hot chocolate, and systematically take the ornaments out of storage and place them on the tree. Some of the ornaments could be hung by anyone who got to them first. But some of them had to be put on the tree by a specific person—the ballerina ornaments were mine to hang, as was the “Baby’s First Christmas” ornament given to me when I was small.

This tradition of trimming the tree together officially started the holiday season in the Ehrlich family. The season wouldn’t have felt the same if we had skipped it—in fact, it probably wouldn’t have felt like the holiday season at all. This tradition set the tone and focused us on each other and the season.

I’m reminded of the importance of tradition whenever I attend worship. Some worship traditions are specific to certain faith communities—how Holy Communion is served, for example, varies from congregation to congregation. But some traditions are universal to Christians. We all gather to pray, hear the Bible read and talk about our faith. How we do that in our particular communities can look different, but the tradition of coming together to worship Christ in our midst remains the same.

Even in the earliest Christian communities, tradition was valued.

The followers of Jesus in Thessalonica were told: “So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter” (2 Thessalonians 2:15). Traditions help communities form their own unique identity. Traditions help establish ways of observing times and seasons, like my family’s tradition of trimming the tree. Traditions also connect us to those who came before us – it can be humbling to participate in a tradition that has been done by people in many generations before you.

One of my favorite movies is *Fiddler on the Roof*. The very first scene includes the song “Tradition,” in which Tevye and his neighbors explain the traditions and roles of those who live in their town.

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Gender roles aside, I have always loved this song. The villagers' traditions shape how they live life every day, giving the community stability. In the story, some of the villagers' traditions end up changing, because the world around them is changing. Tradition is both stable and flexible—our traditions connect us to our past and present community, while being able to change based on our current context.

Jesus was very clear that traditions don't need to stay the same forever. We read in the Gospels about Jesus breaking the traditions of his day by healing people on the sabbath, talking to women, eating with sinners, overturning money tables in the temple, touching lepers, and teaching hearers to love both their friends and their enemies.

Jesus changed these traditions because they no longer fit what God was doing. God was doing something new and exciting. These traditions were keeping some people from experiencing God's love and presence, and they needed to change. So Jesus changed them.

What can we learn from Jesus changing traditions? As long as a tradition still makes sense with what God is doing currently and adds value to a community, it can usually continue. But if the tradition either doesn't make sense anymore or harms other people, it should change or end.

And when old traditions need to change or end, it gives us an opportunity to start new traditions—traditions that share God's love with everyone and add value to our communities. The Holy Spirit is constantly moving and blowing new life into our communities, and keeping traditions just for the sake of tradition is not something Jesus was into. Our God is in the business of change and surprise—and that includes sometimes shaking up our deeply-held traditions and shaping them into something new.

There's a great story in the Book of Acts about God starting a new tradition. In chapter 10, Peter visits Cornelius, a Roman military officer. God sent Peter there by giving him a vision. Now Peter meets not only Cornelius, but also a bunch of Cornelius' friends. Peter eats with them and tells them about Jesus. And they become believers, receive the Holy Spirit, and are baptized! Pretty awesome stuff, wouldn't you say?

But the early church leaders did not find this awesome. Peter and the church leaders were Jews, like all the the other believers and Jesus himself. And Cornelius and his friends were Gentiles, non-Jews.

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Jewish law and tradition said that Jewish people were not to associate with Gentiles. And not only did Peter interact with Gentiles, he invited them into the Jesus-follower fold. The leaders were pretty upset.

But Peter explains his vision to the leaders. He tells them that God told him not to put up walls between Gentiles and Jews. And he says, "The Spirit told me to go with them and not make a distinction between them and us" (Acts 11:12). Peter recognized that the walls between the two groups had to come down, because of what God was doing. The tradition needed to change.

And Peter explains that the Gentiles he spoke to received the Holy Spirit and believed, just as the Jewish believers had. He tells the leaders, "If God gave them the same gift he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" (Acts 11:17)

And at first, the leaders are stunned to silence. But then, they praise God! Like Peter, they recognized God was doing a new and amazing thing—God was giving the gift of faith in Jesus to all humanity! It was time for a new tradition.

Our traditions shape our communities and how we relate to each other. We are invited to take up God's new activity in our lives and participate in traditions that help ourselves and others experience God's love in an inclusive way.

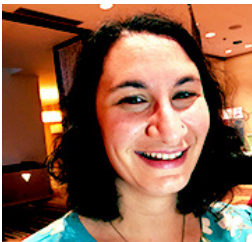
Discussion questions:

1. What are some of your favorite traditions? Why do you enjoy them so much?
2. How do your favorite traditions help you and others in your community connect with each other and with God?
3. Can you think of a tradition you've experienced that could be changed or ended because God is doing something new? If it needs to be changed, what changes could be made? If it needs to end, would a different tradition make sense in its place?

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Closing prayer:

Loving God, you have made us to love and serve you and others. Thank you for your Holy Spirit's movement in our lives. Thank you for the ability to establish traditions in our communities. Help us to look at our traditions in light of what you are doing in our world today, so that we may continue to do your work in the world. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Becca Ehrlich is a Lutheran pastor serving as Associate Director of Admissions at United Lutheran Seminary in Gettysburg and Philadelphia, Pa. She blogs about minimalism from a Christian perspective at www.christianminimalism.com.

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