

**Stand Firm! Hold Fast!**  
**These Traditions Will Last!**

November 11, In the Year of Our LORD, 2007

Gates Presbyterian Church  
The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Matthew 5:1-16; Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21; Haggai 1:15b – 2:9 and Hebrews 12:1-2

At one point in the 1971 production of “Fiddler on the Roof,” we hear the main character Tevye say:

Because of our traditions, we've kept our balance for many, many years. Here in Anatevka, we have traditions for everything... How to sleep, how to eat... how to work... how to wear clothes. For instance, we always keep our heads covered, and always wear a little prayer shawl that shows our constant devotion to God. You may ask, "How did this tradition get started?" I'll tell you! [*pause*] I don't know. But it's a tradition... and because of our traditions. ... Every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do.

In the course of the musical, we witness Tevye as he faces challenges to many of the traditions he held dear. He faced the dilemma so many of us face today: when it comes to “tradition,” which ones are of God and which are of humanity? Which ones are immutable, that is not open to debate because they come from the Almighty and which ones are, open to, should we say “wiggle room.”

For example, “tradition” has it that *today* is Veterans Day. True to that tradition, the Town of Gates is celebrating Veterans Day activities starting – well, right now – at 10:30am. As much as that timing precludes any of us from participating, the timing has a basis in tradition. I recall that when I lived in Germany as a young child and then again as a teenager that at eleven minutes after eleven o'clock on the eleventh day of the eleventh month, there was a solemn observation of the end of World War I. It is true that the Germans had a less than positive perspective of the events of November 11, 1918. The armistice document signed that day was, in essence, a surrender on Germany's part, a defeat that simmered for thirty years and contributed to the tragic events of World War II. Nevertheless, most of Europe fell silent at 11:11 on 11/11.

In the United States, November 11 as Armistice Day was, in 1954, renamed Veterans Day to honor veterans of all U.S. wars. The current debate about Veterans Day is about when to celebrate and what to celebrate – and here, traditions old and new clash. Do we celebrate today, November 11, or tomorrow when government offices are closed? Then there is my chagrin this past Thursday when I opened an e-mail from Circuit City that announced that I only had a few more days before their Veterans Day Sale ended Saturday ... as in yesterday, a full day before Veterans Day.

On previous occasions, I have reminded everyone that the tradition of the church is that the twelve days of Christmas run from Christmas Day to January 5, between Christmas Eve on December 24 and the Day of Epiphany (Three Kings Day) on January 6. I admit that in the grand scheme of things, when someone celebrates what, whether a Veterans Day Sale ends on November 10 or we remember the sacrifice of veterans today or tomorrow or whether someone

celebrates Christmas on December 24 or January 6 or anytime before between or afterwards, the tradition that really matters is our embrace of the *messages* on which those special events are based. Finally, what really matter are the traditions that are ours of God, the ones that are immutable, unchangeable and not debatable.

As to Veterans Day, the issue is simple – and that is to find a way, in private meditation or public observance, to remember God’s call to us to be peacemakers and the sacrifice of time, talent, limb if not life of those veterans of wars in which our nation has participated. A moment of silent prayer is in order. .... Amen.

As to the ways of God, are there are not wonderful if not challenging traditions to which we would adhere? Our emphasis these last few months on the words found in the eleventh and twelfth chapters of the Letter to the Hebrews served to remind us of the faithfulness of generations of people who lived before Jesus – and to instill in us a sense of awe of the ministry and mission of those who have lived since – and in particular those of Gates Presbyterian Church who served their LORD so faithfully. With fond memories of their devotion written on our hearts or captured on that fifteen minute DVD, we take those traditions of the past as beacons that challenge us, cajole us, perhaps even shake us so that we might prayerfully and purposefully consider our promise to be God’s servants in our day and age.

Our Gospel Lesson this morning starts with those wonderful words we call the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes. The most memorable verses from Matthew 5 are the first twelve, but hear again the next four in the context of who we are to be as the people of God, the traditions in which we stand as disciples of the Christ, and in the context of the ministry and mission by which Gates Presbyterian Church is known. In hearing these words, we recall how witnesses of the past fulfilled Jesus’ admonitions. In so hearing, we are challenged as well.

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light so shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:13-16

Simply put, the peoples in Gates Presbyterian Church’s past were a light in the darkness, a beacon of mission and ministry in the name of Christ – for and to people who needed the good news so very, very much. How can we but do likewise? How can we not, in faith, follow in their footsteps? As they persevered and accomplished whatever they set out to do in years past, so we can do today. From ministering to people in crisis or need, from building and maintaining church edifices, to providing curriculum for younger and older disciples, to reaching beyond the walls of the church to places near and far, that cloud of witnesses that brought us to this point did so with *every expectation that the next generation would pick up where they left off*. In and from this place, the immutable traditions of God have been announced and experienced. We are to stand firm, hold fast and know that the traditions that really matter will last if we do our part to ensure they are taught, lived and shared with each succeeding generation and with those persons we meet and greet in our daily lives and who we invite to join us in all that we believe and do.

As with many other Christians, we of the reformed tradition are able to distinguish between the traditions generated by humans (usually *men*) and those that are of God. Words printed in red in many editions of the Gospels, words spoken *by* Jesus hold a special place in our hearts and souls and minds – and well they should. The commandments of the Old Testament, the ten “big” ones and the hundreds of others are immutable. We realize that laws like those that speak of what happens when one person’s bull kills a neighbor’s sheep are hardly as significant as “Thou shalt not kill” or “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” but we are also able to distinguish those laws of Moses from some of the words of Paul dictated by his times and society and which are in many instances seemingly contradicted by other words of Paul. Those who defended human slavery on the grounds that Paul did not seem to condemn it or those who would keep women from having leadership roles in the church because in one instance Paul says women should be quiet in church ignore Paul’s words in his letter to the Galatians when he speaks of how human ways are at odds with the dreams and hopes of God. Any human “tradition” that limits someone based on gender, nationality or social standing, collapses in the face of some of Paul’s most precious words:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, there you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise. Galatians 3:28-29

So what *is* immutable? To which traditions should we stand fast and hold firm? There are some simple “tests:” Is the tradition one that is loving, based on the pure love God renders? Is it uplifting? Does it fit or clash with words found in the Gospels like those we heard this morning that we call the Beatitudes? Does the act or ministry reflect the love of our LORD Jesus Christ? Does it instill and embrace the ways of hope, grace, peace, justice, joy and love? Is it inclusive or does it have as its agenda the ways of division, hierarchy, prejudice or exclusion? Is it based on mercy, grace and humility?

When it comes to stewardship, there are many traditions from which to choose. There are those church groups that stress the tithe, the Biblical giving of one tenth of all one has. There are some churches where the practice is that one submits a copy of ones 1040. Then, somebody figures out which number to use to divide by ten and, behold, that is ones obligation to the church. I remember when a minister of another church in Warsaw told me – with a straight face – that his church’s council asked members to give them copies of their W-2s. The look on my face – which was frankly one of horror – caught him off guard. My response to his question, “Doesn’t your church do that?” was a wide-eyed shaking of my head, “well *no!*” I told him that up to that point I had *never* heard of such a practice, much less, considered it!

Frankly, a well-kept secret is that when Jesus spoke about the tithe, he was often pejorative, especially with the scribes and Pharisees. He questioned the intent behind Jewish leaders giving *exactly* one tenth of all they owned, even their supply of herbs and spices. (I can just see them with a knife, dividing a pile of marjoram into equal parts so as to give one-tenth to the synagogue.) ... Jesus accused them of exactitude when it came to their tithe while ignoring the plight of orphans and widows. *Our* tradition holds that people be *intentional* about giving, that Christ’s church get a fair share of ones time, talent and treasure. Some have the means to give ten percent, some even more – many far less – but it is the *intentionality* of the act that matters – and our tradition is that prayerful and intentional giving is at the heart of our stewardship and that the gift of time, talent, prayer, concern and outreach is part of the whole package.

Intentionality means constant reconsideration. It means looking at what a church's leadership considers necessary in order to fulfill ministry and mission. Yes, that takes money, and contrary to what many people think, Jesus talks about money, most often of how money and possessions can own us and control our lives instead of how we as children of God can be stewards of all we have – for the benefit of ourselves, our families, our communities, our church and the world.

How easy it is to fall back on traditions that suit our purposes. A member of the stewardship committee in the first church I served told of a visit with an older member who donated \$2 each week and had done so for some time. The committee member knew not to cajole, but this woman, who had no family, was active member in the church and had some means. When asked if she could raise her \$2 a week pledge, she announced that her grandfather had given her \$2 to put in the collection every Sunday and before his death told her to continue the tradition. So, she put \$2 in the collection plate every Sunday ... for the next sixty years. The suggestion that \$2 in 1924 was very different from \$2 in 1984 fell on deaf ears. She felt that she had promised to give \$2 every week. Years later, I heard she followed other advice from her grandfather who knew she was the last of the family. She wrote her will with the church as her sole heir. That church survives today in large measure because of the bequest she left. As grateful as the people of the church in Ogdensburg are, just think of how the church could have thrived when she was alive!

.....

I had reason to rewrite this sermon after news of Ryan Simms' death. He would have been but nineteen the day after Thanksgiving. We as a congregation will struggle again with how fragile and frail is human life. We will struggle with the reality of a life cut short by tragedy, but is this not one of those moments when we draw on the greatest traditions that have brought us to this time and place, when the gifts of God's love, the grace of our LORD Jesus Christ, and the fellowship we know through the power of the Holy Spirit – when those gifts come and call on us to be the church, the gathering of God's people who know that in all things, God is with us, stands by, and invites us to be stewards – not only of our treasure, our time and talent, but of the very substance of our souls and the beatings of our hearts. This is appropriately, a time of tears, a time of loss, a time of sorrow – but it is for moments like this that we are the church, that we sustain a ministry and a mission so that we can be God's people for God's people. Ryan has joined that cloud of witnesses – and in the name of all those who have gone back to God before us, we stand firm and hold fast to all that has brought us to this place and promises to move us, shape us, and mold us – as the people of God – for all time to come.

Amen.