

Peter had a vision

Acts 11:1-18

May 6, 2007

We live at the intersection of past and future. We live in neither the past nor the future, but at their point of intersection, at that point of delicate balance between what we have been and what we will become.

It is a delicate balance, because both past and future exert a mighty pull on us. We may idolize the past or idealize the future, but, in either case, memory or desire may deprive us of joy in the present, when "today" simply doesn't measure up to what we had or what we want. Or, on the other hand, the burden of past mistakes or worries about a daunting future may leave us ill-equipped to live "today" with energy and purpose.

Our past shapes who we are, but our past can never be who we are. We are constantly changing, constantly growing, constantly becoming, doing our best to maintain the delicate balance that allows us to preserve our identity while adjusting to the challenges of an ever-changing world around us.

Tevye said it's like being "a fiddler on the roof!" It's tradition, he said, that allows us to maintain our precarious perch. Tradition is the sum of the rituals and rules, stories and songs, values and convictions and memories that give your life meaning, that define who you are or, at least, who you intend to be. For Tevye, tradition meant respect for elders, respect for parents, respect for the Word, respect for the rules specifying how and whom you marry. It meant honesty and fairness, hard work and generosity, pride and fellowship. What does tradition mean for you? What does tradition mean for us?

Tradition keeps us balanced like a fiddler on the roof, but do remember, it's not a flat roof! We are delicately balanced between past and future, between tradition and change. Tradition that refuses to change, dies. And change for change's sake, simply going with the cultural tide with no reference to tradition, is chaos. Either way you fall off the roof, it hurts!

That is Tevye's dilemma: *on the one hand ... on the other hand*. What can I let go of? What must I hold on to? What changes can I accept? What changes will break me? In the end, what guides him to an answer is not tradition itself, but the deeper values, the deeper loyalties, that tradition itself seeks to uphold. We are not meant to be guardians of tradition. Tradition is meant to be the guardian of those things we cannot afford to lose, those things we cannot lose without losing ourselves.

But what happens when a tornado hits? How do you stay on the roof? What happens when change is not incremental, but fundamental? What happens when Chava marries a goy?

That was the sort of dilemma confronting the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. They were Jews, Jews kept afloat in a sea of foreign domination by preserving their own distinctive traditions: by keeping the law of Moses, by keeping the Sabbath, by observing the holy days, by keeping away from foods and places and people deemed unclean. Their heroes were people like Daniel, the one who refused to bow to pressures to conform and be like everybody else, the one who held fast to the traditions of his faith in a strange land, even at the risk of his life.

They did know about change. Jesus had changed their lives profoundly! Jesus turned their world upside down, challenging, reinterpreting, and redefining their traditions, but not rejecting that tradition. In Jesus, the tradition came alive. In Jesus, God was with them, God was still speaking to them, God was filling them with new life and new hope and leading them in a new way. Jesus changed them profoundly, but they were still Jews.

But then the tornado came . The wind of the Spirit blew in ... on Gentiles.

You see, up to this point, the early Christian community was made up almost entirely of Jews and the odd Gentile who might join them was expected first to be circumcised, to become Jewish. But now Peter was eating and lodging with uncircumcised Gentiles, and whole groups of Gentiles were being baptized in Jesus' name, with no deference at all to Jewish law.

This was a most critical moment in the history of the early church. If these Gentiles had not been welcomed into the believing community, or if they had been required to pledge allegiance to the whole of the Jewish tradition before being welcomed, you and I might well not be here today. It is likely that the few followers of Jesus would have remained a fringe sect within Judaism. But the Gentiles were welcomed. They were welcomed!

This is the part of the story that astonishes me. What was it that allowed the Jewish Christians so quickly, seemingly so easily, to change their minds, to praise God and to declare, *Then God has given to the Gentiles also the opportunity to repent and live ...?* They were raised from birth on the purity laws. From birth they were taught the importance of maintaining their distinctiveness as people of the covenant, their unique identity as the people of Yahweh. They belonged to the Lord and the Lord belonged to them! Mixing with Gentiles, letting Gentiles in, jeopardized their exclusive relationship to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob ... their God!

So what was it that allowed them to let go? What was it that allowed them to set aside such a basic element of their tradition? What was it that allowed them to weather the tornado, to maintain their balance? Deeper values, deeper loyalties. Real loyalty to the very God their tradition was meant to serve.

For Peter it was a vision, a vision of the future God had in mind, a vision confirmed by personal experience, confirmed as he witnessed God's gift of the Holy Spirit to a Gentile household. For the rest, the leaders of the church back in Jerusalem, it was Peter's story and their readiness to believe his story, to believe in his vision, to believe in what he had witnessed.

But, it's more than that, not just about their trust in Peter, but about their trust in God. They were not mere guardians of a tradition, but witnesses to a living God, a living God revealed to them through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. They expected to hear God speak! They expected to see God act! They expected God to do things -- wonderful things! gracious things! -- things beyond anything they could have imagined.

That's what we mean by conversion. Conversion is a wholesale transformation of mind and heart by the grace of God. Conversion is when an encounter with the living God changes in fundamental ways the way we think, about almost everything, and the way we feel, about almost everything!

Peter experienced that kind of conversion, more than once ... once on a beach, once in a vision. The Jerusalem believers experienced that kind of conversion. Paul experienced that kind of conversion. Jews and Gentiles in Antioch experienced that kind of conversion.

The Christian abolitionists including some of the founders of this congregation experienced that kind of conversion. Martin Luther King experienced that kind of conversion.

Christians who said "No" to apartheid in South Africa experienced that kind of conversion. Christians who say "No" to poverty and to the social and economic structures that aggravate poverty have experienced that kind of conversion.

Christians who say "No" to torture under any circumstance, Christians who seek to protect the basic human rights of every person under every circumstance, have experienced that kind of conversion.

Christians who say "No matter who you are, you are welcome here" and mean it, have experienced that kind of conversion.

We need that kind of conversion! We need that kind of revival of our faith! We need to understand that we are not guardians of an inherited tradition, but witnesses to what the living God is doing here and now among us. We need to be ready to move into the new places and new tasks to which God calls us, ready to let go or set aside whatever it is that keeps from doing the new things God calls us to do.

We too have been given a vision. Am I suggesting that our vision, our vision for the church in its next five years, comes from God? Yes, I am! I do believe this vision has come from God, because it didn't come from one of us, or from a few of us, but from all of us, as we met together and sought sincerely to pay attention to the leading of God's Spirit together. Our vision, like Peter's vision, can open new avenues for ministry for us, ministries for the people of this church, and ministries by the people of this church.

But, in the end, it is not the vision that matters, not the tradition that matters, not even this church that matters. What matters is ...

You know. You know what matters. You know who matters.