

Sermon: **A Living Tradition**

Text: Ecclesiastes 3:1-15; Galatians 4:4-5; Mark 1:14b-15

Reverend James R. Henry

The Elijah Kellogg Congregational Church

Harpswell, Maine

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Some time ago I was given a handwritten sermon by the Reverend Elisha Eaton, the first settled minister of our church. I've since given it to the Harpswell Historic Society. There are six dates noted in the margin indicating dates preached. The first is 1733, prior to the Town of Harpswell, and no doubt preached in Braintree, Massachusetts. The other dates are concurrent with Eaton's residence here, and it is therefore most likely that he preached this sermon from this very pulpit.

After a long introduction (4 pages) it reads: *"But I return to the text which contains instruction worthy of our deliberation and consideration... which will lead us into some profitable meditations."* Then he deliberates and considers for many more pages, and then says: *"The doctrines and observations that I design to speak to from the text are these...."* He lists an outline of four points, and then continues: *"To such of these thoughts in their proper order as briefly as the nature and importance of the subjects will permit, we now turn at this time"* Apparently the nature and importance of the subjects did not permit brevity!

I will not be so long.

As the Kellogg Congregational Church of Harpswell, we are part of a rich tradition. But more than that, as the Church of Jesus Christ, we are *participants* in a *living* tradition... a tradition that is alive and growing. It might well be said that we have been "traditioned" and we continue in the process of "traditioning".

This old meeting house smacks of tradition. The memorial stones in the cemetery behind me mark the lives of past players in this tradition. They were vital participants. They were important establishers and shapers along the way. But what we celebrate today is not a dead tradition limited to the confines of a cemetery or an old building. This is not simply our recollection of a static historic past. Rather, we celebrate the unfolding purposes and workings of God from age to age.

Moses said, *"Lord, you have been our dwelling place (our home) in all generations. From everlasting to everlasting, you are God."*

David said, *"The Lord is good. His steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations."*

The Apostle Paul reflects, *"When the fullness of time had come, God sent his son."*

And Jesus began his public ministry by announcing, *"The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near."*

The concept of times and seasons throughout the Scriptures is about God advancing his purposes in a continuing pattern from generation to generation. That's the living tradition we participate in today! As a people of God; as a faith community of Christ; as the Kellogg Church, we are a people of a living tradition, rooted and linked with the wisdom and experience of the past, alive to the realities of the present, and looking hopefully with vision to the future.

There are those who are overly nostalgic about the past. They might indeed be said to be living in the past. They have no vitality for the present, only reflecting on the past. They have not vision for the future, only fearing change. They sit in idleness, rehearsing and repeating the dead traditions of the past. Their viewpoint is old-fashioned. Their manner of life is out of date. Their disposition tends to become sour and cynical. They are only nostalgic for the past.

Then there are others of the opposite extreme, who have only contempt for the past, and find themselves confined to the present moment. They have no roots, only a desire for novelty

and originality. They live the present moment by impulse, being carried along by a succession of short termed trends. They have been described as dead fish, always floating with the current.

There are yet others, who dream of the future with no thought of how to get there. "Que Sera, Sera. Whatever will be, will be. The future's not ours, you see."

We lose our way in dead traditionalism.

We lose our way in trendy contemporaneity.

We lose our way if we can only wish somehow for a better, but uncertain future.

But we are called to be participants in a living tradition; in the unfolding life and purposes of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, and being made real by the Holy Spirit, and being expressed through the Church from generation to generation.

As a society of people, we have always struggled and always will, in our efforts to reconcile tradition and innovation. We will do that successfully only as we see ourselves as part of a living and growing reality, and as participants in a living tradition. As the living community of Christ we are participating in the unfolding realities of God alive within us and among us by the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

This living tradition nurtures and shapes our lives. It provides resource and wisdom from the past. It provides depth and perspective in the present. It provides inspiration for our future.

The concept and reality of the Church's living tradition might be pretty well illustrated by the family reunion. As the family gathers from time to time there is an obvious identity and sense of belonging. The old stories and sayings are repeated and cherished. There are special places... homesteads and vacations spots.

Who this family is, is shaped by so much more than genetics. It is shaped and perpetuated by many experiences and decisions. And these patterns and customs keep unfolding through the ages, from generation to generation.

Every reunion is different. There have been changes. Some have died. New members have been born. There are fresh experiences and new stories to tell.

The Church is like that. This local congregation lives a tradition that is growing and changing. As new members join and own the covenant with us, they appropriate the tradition and heritage as their own. They bring new ideas and strengths and needs, and we keep changing. Yet we are not lost without historical root, or present focus, or vision for the future, because we are a people of Christ living and walking forward in his eternal way.

So we are not locked in a static historic frame. Neither are we caught by chance or social currents or flighty trends. We are alive in Jesus Christ and in his Spirit, experiencing that goodness of the Lord; that steadfast love that endures forever; and that faithfulness of God from generation to generation. We are participants with the God of creation and with Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, and in the vitality of the Holy Spirit working among us and through us.

We are participants in the living tradition of the Church of Jesus Christ.

Amen.