

Twenty-Fifth Sunday After Pentecost – John Brittingham

Haggai 1:15b-2:9; Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17; Luke 20:27-38

Have you ever noticed that academia is super weird? If you're ever thrust into having a conversation with someone who isn't an academic by profession or imposition, you might find that explaining what exactly we do when we have—say, presidential inaugurations, or commencements, or football games—is quite revealing of our general oddity. I am the son of a Spanish teacher and a steel worker, so when I explain what I have to do to prepare for a new semester or to complete a doctoral program or one day stand in line for an academic procession—I realize that I sound like someone talking about the final seasons of *Lost*. Trying to explain why we wear robes even though we're not monks or why we wear a bunch of fancy scarves that neither keep you warm in November nor absorb your sweat in May is akin to talking about smoke monsters and Dharma bases. You sound like you're in a semi-boring cult.

That said, some of our traditions are mildly entertaining. Take the unofficial tradition of streaking the freshmen mugging here at our very own Greenville College. I'm sure no one in this congregation has ever debased themselves so fully as to remove every article of clothing and run full-speed across Scott Field whilst their tender parts danced in the humid late summer air. Indeed, these “august personages in flesh-tones” flailing themselves across our local college's sacred green space are a staple of nearly every freshman's first few days at school. Like I said, academia is weird—we make a tradition out of fancy scarves and nudity.

These traditions, for better or worse, form our identities. They define us as people who come from some place, who dwell in a particular space amongst peculiar people and do peculiar things. This is especially true of American collegiate sports. If you attend Greenville College football games, you will notice that the team itself never stops talking, chanting, and yelling at and with each other. They have catchphrases and mantras, mottos, and platitudes. And they say them all the time. I single out the GC football players only because I live with 3 of them—so it's what I know. I'm sure volleyballers are weird too. Lest you think these traditions are anything out of the ordinary, just ask anyone from Texas A&M university to give their “whoop” (an act which they are required to do upon request from anyone); you will see that even sports in academia are universally weird.

However, in stark contrast to the encouragement that Greenville College football players—and I would hope most college athletes—demonstrate, this past week we have seen the dark side of weird traditions come to light. At some point over the past few weeks the Miami Dolphins of the National Football League experienced the revelation of an altercation of some kind. I'll quote writer Brian Phillips at length here:

“The Dolphins have, or maybe had, a 24-year-old left tackle named Jonathan Martin. And they have, or maybe had, a 30-year-old left guard named Richie Incognito. Last week, Martin left the

team to seek help for emotional issues. Then allegations emerged that Incognito had been bullying him. Hazing him, if that word makes you feel better. Threatening him. Threatening his family. Leaving him racist voice mails. Sending him homophobic texts.”

The result of the revelation of this prolonged period of bullying was rather astounding. Few were sympathetic to the younger Martin, saying something along the lines of “while Incognito’s racism was wrong, football is a game for warriors and warriors don’t respond to threats by turning soft.” It was as though the tradition of warriors of the gridiron was itself under attack and thus a homophobic and racist older player was allowed to engage in a prolonged campaign of threats and bullying in order to preserve the warrior way.

“Warriors make war on other warriors”, Phillips tells us. It is a tradition as ancient as the Greeks if not older. Men and women gather up their various loins, they buffet their bodies and transform themselves into forces of extremely focused violence. They become problem-solvers. These traditions are embraced without much consideration because they shape the identity not only of those who participate in the actual play of the sport of football or field hockey or Magic: The Gathering but of the game played itself. The problem with the warrior tradition of American football in the case of Martin/Incognito and the talking heads that churned the comment mill is that they perceived the threat of the situation to be a threat to their very identity and thus pounced to protect that identity rather than using it as an occasion to investigate those traditions.

What are we to do when faced with traditions that both sustain us and uphold injustices? Our lectionary passages today wrestle with this very question and provide us with a single response: take courage. We are given three instances where tradition is called into question or where identity is threatened and in each place we are motivated to respond courageously. But what does such courage look like?

Let us turn first to the Gospel of Luke where we find Jesus, confronted by the Sadducees. Now, the Sadducees are what we might call purists. They are the kind of guys who, when told that they are the keepers of the flame, stand literal guard over a literal flame. Granted, they do sound like the kind of guys who you’d want to do your taxes and not the kind of guys you’d like to have a drink with. However, the Sadducees are far more sympathetic than meets the eye. In fact, their situation is not unlike that of many people in our time. For example, they live in a world of unprecedented connectivity. Pax Romana opened the world to new ideas from all over the place and identities were merging and intertwining in unheard of ways. It was as if, in this new age, one’s very identity could get swept away in the flurry of new ideas. There were new religious sensibilities emerging, something like a new messianic figure every week it seemed, new political ideas, new technologies, and certainly new ways of communicating. In the face of a veritable “sharknado” of change, clinging to one’s traditions in their purest forms seemed the only way to guarantee stability and identity. If you don’t know where you come from, you don’t know who you are.

It is through this logic of purity and conformity to tradition that Jesus is perceived as a threat to their order and way of life. The Sadducees decide to ask him a crazy question about resurrection and one bride for seven brothers (the lesser known version of the musical) in hopes of stumping Jesus and proving him and his new-fangled ways to be nothing but some hyped-up b.s. They are the ones who know the truth in its purity and Jesus is the one who is blaspheming with all this talk of resurrection.

The Sadducees are so hell-bent on preserving their traditions that they perceive Jesus to be destroying those traditions in the name of these traditions. Instead, Jesus challenges the Sadducees to see him as uncovering their core. It is important at this point to note that the passage skips a line from another synoptic gospel, the gospel of Mark, that might be helpful, "Jesus said to them, 'Is not this why you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?'" Indeed, the point is not about eschatology or whose bride is it anyway. The point is that questions such as the one asked by the Sadducees are the wrong way to go about addressing the importance of tradition in a transitional age. They don't get it. The Sadducees are afraid and in their fear they cling blindly to the traditions handed down to them. They don't even realize how wrong they are, how lost they are in their preservation of the purity of the old ways. In their pursuit of purity, they strangle the life right out of the very traditions they hold so dearly. They are blind to the simple fact that traditions are not simply inherited. They must be fought with and fought for.

We find in our epistle reading a similar situation. Only this time, it is not the protectors of the old ways accosting a transgressor. Instead, it is a small community of new Christians who find themselves surrounded by increasingly changing times that worries about what to do.

Let's be frank, Paul's teachings are frightening. They change one's identity. Die to sin, die to the old ways, become a new creation, etc. They upend the status quo. And, they are not the only teachings. New ideas, strategic initiatives for organizational progression, crowd-sourced movements for collective wholeness and their ilk are abundant. These Christians are frightened, paralyzed, and uncertain of not only what to believe but also how to act. Shaking nations, more like shaking in one's boots.

How can they embrace the right traditions, the right way to do things when there is such confusion? How can anyone figure out what to do when the old ways are no longer what they used to be and the new ways aren't exactly clear? And then Jesus isn't walking the earth anymore and the guy who started this whole thing is off in Ephesus or Philippi or some other Roman metropolis. And then, on top of all of this, Paul is telling them that some guy is gonna come and put himself in the position of God and try to deceive them into following him. Dios Mio. Who wouldn't be afraid of a message like this?

Much of the fear demonstrated by those who embrace apocalyptic messages, your general doom and gloom-ers, is the fear of a changing present. Be they environmental whistleblowers, surveillance state leakers, left-behind prophecy conferencers, or higher-ed Chicken Littles

screaming to us that the sky is falling...we Christians know the truth: For us, the sky has always been falling even though it never completely fell. And fear of the present is a lack of faithfulness. It is a lack of fidelity to one's traditions to the point that you know when they work, when they're full of life, and when they are dying branches. Traditions, it turns out, can be helpful. But if you don't know your traditions in the first place, you lose your way all too easily.

Finally, in our Old Testament passage, we find a people that have returned home after years of exile. They are led by three men: Zerubbabel the administrator, Joshua the High Priest, and Haggai the Prophet. Upon their return from exile, the people insisted on building houses for themselves and not giving priority to the building of God's house. One way of looking at it is that the temple is the center of community life. By insisting on building their own homes first, the exiles are insisting on their own individual needs over the needs of everyone. They are falling back on beliefs that place the emphasis on the individual and not on the community. Thus, they show themselves to be a people who lack faith in their collective ability to care for one another. And they lack faith in a God who brought them out of exile in the first place. Instead, they simply look out for themselves.

They show themselves to be a people completely out of touch with their traditions. They dwell in a place where their traditions once mattered and now, it appears, they matter very little. The rituals of temple life and of community life are empty-performed because it's what one does, not because it gives one life. Indeed, they've heard of the splendor of Solomon's temple but they don't know what it ever looked like. It is a tradition, a symbol, which has no significance for them and thus no importance. It is empty like the people who seek to rebuild their lives and their nation after years in exile.

We don't simply inherit our traditions and understand them to be something that makes sense. In the words of philosopher and theologian Cornel West, we have to fight for them. And I would add, we have to fight with them. The former exiles didn't know this and it took the words of a prophet to call them to this realization. Traditions, the live-giving rites and rituals that shape and sustain us, must be fought for. We must wrestle with them until we find the life in them. And such wrestling takes courage.

Our scripture passages all highlight the dangers of traditions. We can cling to them as the only place we find our identity and in doing so, we choke out the life within them. Or we can fail to fight with them, fail to understand the importance they have, fail to see the life inside these traditions and then fall prey to whatever latest idea comes our way. Or we can go along without thinking much about where we come from and who we are that we have no identity, we have no faith, because we have nothing towards which we should be faithful.

The response that our scriptures say is appropriate is that of courage. Three times we are admonished to take courage. Take up the courage to examine deeply who you've allowed yourself to be. Take up the courage to see that without wrestling with, pondering, questioning, and reflecting upon our traditions, all we have are dead rituals. Take up the courage to see that

faithfulness is not blindness. It is the task of continually taking up our crosses, of taking up the cause of God's justice, God's mercy, and God's loving-kindness.

Courage is not simply facing up to a problem with vitriol, indignation, and violence. It is not proving yourself a true warrior by pushing back when someone pushes at you. It is the task of learning how to die to all those tiny ways that we cling to dead habits, dead rituals, and dead traditions. Courage is learning how to die in order to begin living. It is embracing the wild life within those habits, rituals, and traditions. Courage is seeing that in God alone, we are not dead, but we are alive. For God is not God of the Dead. God is God of the living.