

## *Chapter 10*

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### A Living Tradition

When we are told in the Gospels that Jesus said he had come to bring us life in all its fullness, we have a hint of the divine intention and gift that came through Jesus. Because the primary holy day in Christianity is Easter, we have a demonstration of the scope and quality of this life. The life that God intends and extends to us is neither temporary nor anemic. It is an on-going process filled with enormous possibilities which are universal in scope with eternal dimensions. God's gift of abundant life is beyond all comprehension when you remember the promise that the same Spirit who raised Jesus from death will also give life to our mortality. The fact that God never leaves us or forsakes us in this life or the life to come is overwhelming to people who have not yet grasped the scope of God's love and caring for all people.

Before we go further, let me admit that life can be frustrating and strenuous. There are days when we feel as though we are being put to death. I am not claiming that I have never had those human and debilitating feelings. This mortal life is tough from beginning to end; that is why it is often referred to as the school of hard knocks. At this point, I would only ask you to recall the Gospel stories of Jesus' life. Did he not also join us in all of the rigors of the school of hard knocks? Did all the praise and adulation that many gave him diminish his personal agony? All the titles and acclaim did not change his trip to Calvary. "If you are the Son of God," some shouted, "save yourself and come down from the cross and we will believe." When are we going to learn that God just doesn't do things our way? God's ways, as many in the Scriptures have said, are past finding out. I am glad for this, however, because if I could ever begin to figure God out, I might have to question which of us is really God.

God has given us a wonderful example in Jesus as to how we might expect to grow into mature human beings. The next time you begin to cry out, "Why me, Lord?" remember that Jesus too cried out, "Why me, Lord?" As the saying goes, "What's good for the goose is good for the gander." It is a vivid demonstration that God is not partial toward anyone. The Passion narratives that describe the final days before Jesus was placed on the cross were never meant to make us brood or concentrate on the agonies of this portion of his life. As I have said before, we must remember that the incident of the cross in Jesus' life was relatively minor compared to the glory God wants us to see in the experiences of Jesus' life. The fact of the matter is simple: if he didn't die he could not be raised! The Resurrection is the main point; let us not lose sight of that. Let us also remember that death on the cross was probably the cruelest way to die at that time in history. If the incident of the cross teaches us anything, it demonstrates that God will be with us even through the worst of times. God demonstrates his promise that he is with us always and will never leave us alone. God did not abandon Jesus, and he will not abandon us. This is the positive and life-giving message of the cross experience. As practical and helpful as this may be, however, we can never lose sight of the fact that total victory was only hours and days away. Easter happened! In every circumstance of pain and suffering, Easter will happen for us also! It may, at times, seem much longer than days or hours, but Easter will come. This is the great promise of the Christian message.

This is what we have and this is what we proclaim: We are a part of a living tradition and we must get on with living. As we move along in life, things change, and the more we move along the more things will change. Change is difficult for many people, but it can never be avoided. To resist change by trying to keep older and wonderful traditions current is to fall into the trap of traditionalism, and traditionalism kills. To move along with change and allow the older traditions to change into new traditions for a new day is the way to life in all its fullness. We do not need to fear this progress, because God is always with us, and God enables us to change. Jesus did not want to die; we do not want to die. God did not want Jesus to end, and God does not want us to end. Death, in fact, is not an end but a process of transition to something new. It may be seen in the birth of a child. The child must "die" in its fetal life so it might come forth from the mother into its new form of life. This process of transition may be short or long, rather easy or filled with pain and struggle, but it must happen. Death is never a punishment to be feared, according to Scripture, but a process to bring us into a more active and on-going life with God. It is never prudent to concentrate on the birthing process, but it is wonderful as we wait with expectation and finally hold this new life in our hands after the process is over.

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The Passion of Jesus should never become our focus. We should always live with expectation and focus on the Resurrection. We have the promise that God is always with us in every circumstance, and we have the right to live with the expectation that we will always come forth to new life. During the hard times of life, we learn by experience that this Gospel is true. The best preparation for living is life itself!

One of the incredible gifts which helps us live in our world today is the myriad of stories in Holy Scripture from the earliest times. The Bible is filled with the witness of many people over thousands of years who personally, as individuals and in community, experienced the loving kindness of God. They tell us many times that they found God to be a provider, to always be faithful and eternal, because God never abandoned them. Perhaps the reason so many people still connect to reading these stories from the Bible is because they are not dissimilar from their own experience of the divine. People who are aware of the presence of God in their lives sense that they hold something in common with these earlier pilgrims of faith. We are always encouraged when we come into contact with others who may have shared our experiences and vision of life. The Bible, then, is a living book for many of us who are continuing our journey of faith into the future.

When the inspiration of these witnesses is received in an open way as a written record of their journey, we are the inheritors of a tremendous gift from them and from God. We must be careful, however, not to memorialize them in the fashion of traditionalism by insisting that God will always act in the same manner as was true in their time. God's time is not our time. God is capable of serving all of us in our own time and according to our own needs. The precepts of the universe are too broad to be confined to such a narrow view with such limited capabilities. The Bible is probably the most abused book when it comes to those who are beset with traditionalism. "Thus saith the Lord" is used mostly to set in place the tradition of a certain time rather than to enable one to understand God's ability to help us acquire a similar or wholly new tradition for our time and need. We must always concentrate on the love and grace of God that was active in their lives rather than the tradition or the solution given to their need. Our God is not limited by time and space. Just because God solved a particular problem or brought wisdom and strength to the world at one time does not fix for all time the way it will always be done. God may be the same yesterday, today, and forever. The progressive revelation of God in our world has enriched us in magnificent ways through the course of history.

When the biblical record began, humankind did not even know how to write, and inventions were few. For a long time nothing much new happened. After the invention of the printing press and the industrial revolution things began to change more rapidly. As we entered the twentieth

century, circumstances began to change rapidly. Now, with the computer and the Internet we can hardly keep up with change. There is so much information available, no one person will be able to see and read it all. The way we live and function today is absolutely and completely different from those who were before us, especially those who lived in biblical times. No way could they have even imagined what life would be like, as we now know it. I am also sure that we cannot now even imagine what life will actually be like in the next century. How then could we expect that God's words spoken in biblical times would be for all time and eternity? We have words and concepts that were not possible for them to hear or understand. Consequently, when we try to use their words and concepts in our life and circumstances today we too become confused and bewildered. You cannot put new wine into old wineskins, as the Scripture tells us.

So we must understand that it is impossible for us to follow in the biblical tradition of their day. Not because those traditions were not excellent for their time, but because we are no longer in their time. To try to use and celebrate these older traditions is to be caught up in traditionalism. Our tradition of faith need not adhere to a set of rules and regulations that were applicable to a former time. Our tradition of faith need not adhere to theological or philosophical precepts that were formulated in a former time. When the Scriptures tell us that the just will live by faith, they do not suggest that there are eternally stated rules, regulations, or time-related precepts that must be followed. The faith Scripture is pointing to is a living relationship with the One who makes it all happen. It is a covenant, marriage, or partnership with God, who invites us to enter such a state. It is a lively and progressive union that, once entered, brings us into a more perfect relationship with our world and others in it. It is an individual and community venture that, like all of life, is constantly changing.

The Scripture uses marriage as an example of such a divine union with God. There are many stories in Scripture that use marriage in such a manner, so let me share my thoughts with you using marriage as well. There are many forms of marriage in our world, and we might say there are no two marriages exactly alike. This is true not only in the ceremony which may begin a marriage, but in the life fulfillment of that marriage.

Since most couples in America usually choose each other, we tend to forget that, in most of the world, families still choose who will marry. How couples are chosen will vary according to the social customs of the area's residents. For the greater part of human history people married within the same clan, religion, and class. It is only recently, with the growing interaction of many societies and the convenience of intercontinental travel, that couples may be very divergent in societal connection. This has led to a dramatic change in the planning, the ceremony, and the expectation of the marriage itself. I hope these words are sufficient to bring to your

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attention the great variety in marriage customs that has always existed around our world, and the probability that changes will continue to develop as societies and customs mingle and merge in the future.

The interesting thing to me, however, is that marriage continues. Even though the traditions of the past are incorporated or replaced by modern traditions, people still marry. Even though a significant number of marriages end in divorce, those individuals tend to get married again. There is an evident human need for people to come together, besides the practical need for the propagation of our species. People have a clear mystical and emotional need to form an interdependence of body, mind, and spirit to build for the future. The need for this bonding is much stronger than the traditions that encourage and enable it to be. The traditions, even as they change, only provide the public awareness and celebration of such a union.

I believe marriage continues to be small picture of a much greater and more important union and relationship with the One who is the primal force of our entire existence. This need for God in our lives is strong and powerful for most people. This need creates a great void in the very heart of our humanity when it is not met and celebrated. It is essential because it clarifies the roots and resources of who we are, it gives vitality and vision as to what we are and can be in the present, and it moves us into the future with hope and confidence for all eternity. This is God's design and desire for us, and it cannot be bound by any tradition, especially when it grows into traditionalism. This relationship cannot be fully defined by any tradition—past, present, or future. This relationship is created by the traditions people have established in coming together to celebrate this wonderful grace and love, which fills the whole of the universe continually.

I urge you, therefore, to develop a living tradition, a way of living that enables you to express to others the depth and breadth of this wonderful presence among us. One that enables you to become what God has called you to be, not a tradition that forces you to act out what others expect of you. At a time in history when people have more choices in their venue of life than ever before, it seems strange that so many people feel trapped and bound. The stress of conformity is a great burden for most. Even in the United States, which calls itself the land of the free and the home of the brave, too many are overwhelmed by the pressures of modern society. The trend is to bend toward the pressure to conform rather than to be continually transformed by the power of God.

Unfortunately, too many religious communities are geared toward conformity. They are bastions of traditionalism rather than living communities that encourage us to grow and flourish. Organized religion is more often a social structure with rules and regulations to keep us in place,

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rather than a living organization of people who encourage and help us broaden our knowledge, strengthen our souls, and enable us to do and accomplish in life what we would never be able to do alone. Places where God is worshipped, not the traditions of people about God.

I encourage you to find and attend a progressive church, so you may make progress in your life and bring hope to others. Be open to the power of God in your life and enjoy the opportunity of sharing that strength with others. In the name of the living God, may you find life eternal.