

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, NC
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“Hold Fast to the Traditions That You Were Taught”
II Thessalonians 2: 13-17
25th Sunday After Pentecost/All Saints
November 6, 2016

I have read that Americans spend an average of eight hours every day consuming media. (1)

We wake up in the morning to CNN, Fox News, or MSNBC. We drive to work listening to NPR or Rush Limbaugh. Our various apps and alerts ping our smartphones when there is breaking news about one or the other of the presidential candidates (and isn't there always some breaking news about one or the other of the presidential candidates?!). And there are still a few people who read an actual paper newspaper while drinking their morning coffee.

It was not always this way.

Once upon a time, in 18th century colonial America, to be precise, the most important form of public communication was the SERMON!

That's right. THE SERMON.

It has been estimated, believe it or not, that back in the day, an average person listened to over 7000 sermons in a lifetime, amounting to over 15,000 hours of listening. (Yes, your math is correct: most sermons lasted more than two hours.)

Most of those sermons were delivered in church on Sunday, but often the really memorable sermons were preached on Election Day.

Do you remember the climactic scene in *The Scarlet Letter*? (Or at least the Cliff Notes!)

In that scene, Nathaniel Hawthorne gives readers an unparalleled sense of the solemn pageantry which led up to the Election Day Sermon by the minister Arthur Dimmesdale. “First came the music. It comprised a variety of instruments, perhaps imperfectly adapted to one another, and played with no great skill...that of imparting a higher and more heroic air to the scene of life than passes before the eye.” What followed was the “bright armour” of the military. Next in the procession were the elected officials, the magistrates, who “stood up for the welfare of the state like a line of cliffs against a tempestuous tide.” (2) Next came the minister whose calling was to preach a sermon that unlike sermons in the Church of England which were supposed “to please and inspire” was to “inform and convince,” (3)

And the sermon, it often went this way, according to one commentator: The world has gone, or is about to go to hell. The reason is simple. Whatever is wrong in this world is wrong because people are wrong-headed, wrong-hearted, inattentive to God's commandments, and God is watching and God is angry. (4)

I don't know this for a fact, but I wouldn't be at all surprised to learn that II Thessalonians might have been a popular text for 18th-century Election Day sermons. Had we read the entire letter, we would have picked up on its tone of rage. Chapter 1 rages against those who afflict believers, anticipating the judgment that will fall on them. The early verses of Chapter 2 interpret that rage in the larger context of rebellion against God; (5) “evil and lawlessness” seem to have the upper hand.

In the midst of his tirade over the evil and lawlessness which are roaming the land, Paul interrupts his jeremiad and, after expressing a word of thanksgiving, says, “stand firm and hold fast to the traditions which you were taught by us.”

What were the traditions which Paul had taught the Thessalonians? Perhaps it was his teaching about “the day of the Lord.” Perhaps it was his ethical instruction regarding work. (6)

But if we think about Paul’s larger corpus and particularly what he wrote when there was great division in the church in Corinth, might it also be the tradition which has to do with the church’s celebration of the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper?

We call them the Words of Institution. They come from Paul’s Letter to the Corinthian Church:

23 For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for [g] you. Do this in remembrance of me.” 25 In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

“For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you....”

“Hold fast to the traditions which you have been taught by us...”

In officer training, we have attended to the church’s teachings as they come to us in the two parts of the PCUSA’s Constitution: the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order.

The Book of Order tells us that the Lord’s Table is a place for:

Thanksgiving

Remembering

Invoking God’s blessing

Joining in community with the faithful who are both in heaven and on earth and committing ourselves afresh to love and serve God, one another, and our neighbors in the world. (7)

Brothers and sisters, my Election Day sermon is an invitation to you to hold fast to the traditions which you have been taught by Paul and the saints who have come before us: Come to the Lord’s Table to give thanks, to remember, invoke God’s blessing upon this election and all of life, and to recommit yourself to loving God and neighbor. Come today and come on Wednesday morning for our post-election communion observance as we move into the future on the other side of Election Day.

1.<http://qz.com/416416/we-now-spend-more-than-eight-hours-a-day-consuming-media/>

2.Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Penguin, 1850, 1962), 205-207.

3.Barbara Brown Zikmund, “Election Day sermons were common practice in 18th-century New England,” September 30, 2004, www.ucc.org/election-day-sermons-were-co.

4.Forrest Church, “The Election Sermon,” www.beliefnet.com/columnists/progressiverevival/2008/10/the-election-sermon.html.

5.Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 124.

6.*Ibid.*, 122.

7.Book of Order W-2.4000.