

Re-Forming
by Rev. Ridgley Joyner
Exodus 32:1-14

"Fiddler on the Roof" is a classic musical set in the early 20th century in the fictional village of Anatevka, a small village in the Russian Empire. A couple weeks ago I had the opportunity to see Fiddler at the Swarthmore Players Club. I had never seen it but had heard of it in so many references over the years. I knew there were catchy tunes like "if I were a rich man" or "matchmaker matchmaker bring me a match" and the age old "tradition!" but beyond those great songs, and an impressive bottle dance, lies a deeper story about tradition. The story centers on Tevye, a man who attempts to maintain his Jewish religious and cultural traditions as outside influences encroach upon his family's lives. Tevye has 5 daughters, and, as a poor milkman, marrying his daughters off to more wealthy men could be his ticket to living a more comfortable life. The story revolves around his struggle to uphold tradition while dealing with the present--the changing world and the challenges it presents.

At one point in the play, Tevye is conversing with his eldest. He's made an agreement with the local butcher--he was to be married to his first daughter, Tzeitel. Tzeitel, in tears, begs him to reconsider, sharing that she's made an 'agreement' to get married to her love Motel. This is not tradition! Tradition is for the papa to choose the husband for his daughter. Tradition is not the daughter choosing and making an 'agreement'. Tevye steps off to the side and speaks with himself and God saying:

"He loves her. Love, it's a new starting. On the other hand, our old ways were once new, weren't they? On the other hand, they decided without parents, without the matchmaker. On the other hand, did Adam and Eve have a matchmaker? Oh, yes they did. And it seems these two have the same matchmaker."

Adorable love story aside. Tevye's comment hit me. And not in the way I'd expect.

Our old ways were once new, weren't they? This *tradition* that Tevye so tightly clung to—was being challenged. I don't want to spoil the play for you—but as we follow the story line we begin to see that slowly each of his daughters challenge him to become more and more open to changing how he sees this important tradition.

Tevye grapples with the shifting dynamics of his family as his three eldest daughters each seek to marry for love, rather than following the traditional arranged marriages typical of their culture. This tension between tradition and the desire for love and personal choice struck me.

Because so often people of faith rely on tradition as something to bring us comfort or ease. It is straightforward, it allows things to be predictable, it gives us something to look forward to. It provides order and control. But, if we are not careful we dance the fine line of tradition for tradition's sake. And to that, Tevye reminds us that what is now old was once new.

At some point the beloved things we hold dear to us today took some getting used to for generations past. And it took a level of resilience in the face of change. This morning Nancy read us a story of a people who were faced with great change---The Israelites were newly freed from slavery in Egypt, the past was not too far behind them. There was a lot of new and their

landscape was constantly changing. Our passage is in the middle of some important moments in Exodus that help us get the full picture of what's happening here.

The Ten Commandments established a covenant between the people and their God. The revelation of God's commandments on Mt. Sinai in Exodus 20-23 was a high point in Israel's story. Between the dramatic creation of the covenant in Chapters 19-24 and the breaking of the covenant here in chapter 32, God gives Moses guidelines for the production of the tabernacle, the tent in which God may dwell among them, a powerful promise of presence and protection. God is at work crafting new ways of connecting with his people, so that they may see that in the midst of their shifting landscape, the God who delivered them is also the God who remains with them in times of change. There is so much that is exciting and hopeful in these chapters. Yet, between receiving the covenant and waiting for Moses to return from the mountain, the Israelites fell into chaos.¹

Our scripture reading introduces us to an anxious people. Verse one tells us that They are anxious because Moses has gone up to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, but had "delayed to come down from the mountain". God has made a covenant with God's people through Moses. And even though God is the one who liberated them from slavery, their focus and reliance is on Moses, their leader, "The one who brought them up from the land of Egypt"

So with an uncertain future, they cling to their fears, and do what they know. Why has it been so long? Where is Moses? He is surely dead, and WE will surely die out here. What do we do? Where is Moses?

With the help of Moses's brother Aaron, they use resources from their past, their gold jewelry from Egypt, to craft something they can see, something that is tangible and makes sense to them. They take the gold jewelry the Egyptians gave them to "GET OUT" after the final plague and they melt it down to craft a calf. They craft an idol to replace Moses. In doing so they challenge God's sovereignty as well.

Here, unbeknownst to them, God was beginning a new thing, working among them. Yet when presented with great change, God's people became focused on what was wrong in the moment that needed fixing. They needed Moses, and if not, something else. A quick fix--solving a problem for themselves things in a way that made sense to them. And in doing so ignoring God re-forming them in their midst.

They turned to the golden calf and said "These are your gods Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt". We read that Aaron builds an altar in front of the calf and the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings to this idol. This golden calf angered God. This more than angered God. God wanted to destroy the people he once said he loved so much and listened to their cry delivering them from their suffering. God, the god of true hesed, steadfast love, was angry and he wanted his anger to burn against them.

Last week our confirmands met for our first Session of confirmation and we talked about idols—things we love so much that we can actually replace them with God or they can distract us from God. It was hard for us to get there. Mostly because we felt like, sometimes what we love we see as a gift from God and a blessing. It's hard to think about God giving us this gift—like being really great at a sport or a device to connect us to our loved ones, or a job that allows us to

¹ www.workingpreacher.org

support our family—these things, while blessings from God, could be the very thing that separate us from God?

I wonder for you—what are those Golden calves in your life? The things that distract you from being a faithful disciple?

Unfortunately for the church, we fall victim of this too easily. A “golden calf” at church can revolve around what we see—the buildings and the property, but it even can extend into the pews—the songs we sing, the books those songs are in, the activities we do together. Tradition is important to us—many of us love these things so much because it was and is what connects us to God. And, like Tevye we want to cling to those things in an ever changing world.

The things we hold so tightly to, the traditions we carry because it has worked for us in the past. Perhaps it doesn’t anymore, but we cling nonetheless because we are not able to imagine the new ways God is calling us into being.

For churches as a whole, perhaps our Golden Calf is also the way we used to be—what we used to do—we have a deep tradition and it brings us great comfort. We were reminded of this in the pandemic when we were no longer able to do the things we needed most to be church.

Adam Grant in his book “Think Again” writes:

“we often prefer the ease of hanging on to old views over the difficulty of grappling with new ones. Yet there are also deeper forces behind our resistance to rethinking. Questioning ourselves makes the world more unpredictable. It requires us to admit that the facts may have changed, that what was once right may now be wrong. Reconsidering something we believe deeply can threaten our identities, making it feel as if we’re losing a part of ourselves.

Rethinking isn’t a struggle in every part of our lives. When it comes to our possessions, we update with fervor. We refresh our wardrobes when they go out of style and renovate our kitchens when they’re no longer in vogue. When it comes to our knowledge and opinions, though, we tend to stick to our guns. Psychologists call this seizing and freezing.

We favor the comfort of conviction over the discomfort of doubt, and we let our beliefs get brittle long before our bones. We laugh at people who still use Windows 95, yet we still cling to opinions that we formed in 1995. We listen to views that make us feel good, instead of ideas that make us think hard.”

As Presbyterians, our theology is rooted in this understanding that God is working through intermediaries constantly re-forming us by the power of the Holy Spirit. If we not act as if that is true, we are just as foolish as the Israelites crafting a silly golden calf out of our resources. This angers God.

Our scripture reading this morning reminds us of just how easy it is to cross the line of making tradition—what was---the idol, the thing we worship, the thing we cling to help our anxiety when faced with changing landscape. This. Angers. God. This angers God because God is trying to do a new thing and we are focused on the right now, the right in front of us, the quick fixes!

Along the wilderness journey, we see God providing the Israelites with more and more meaningful ways to access God. After Moses, the first intermediary is the law—the book of the covenant and the ten commandments—and then later the tabernacle along with the cloud of God’s presence that rests there and the priesthood that accompanies it. God was giving them what they wanted and needed, and it was right before their eyes, but they were too foolish to see it because it didn’t look like it had always had.

But the fact that the people's rejection of YHWH and the covenant is not the end of the story is a testimony to the ancient Israelites' experience of the grace of God. Sin does not get the last word due to the tenacious leadership of Moses and the willingness of YHWH to reconsider. God is angry, but God does not destroy. God's grace prevails.

The reality is that we cannot just throw tradition out the window. It is important to us and to our faith. And we read that it is important in scripture. After all, the very scriptures we read today are from an oral tradition of our ancestors. The people in this book are people who cling to the stories and traditions of their past and allow it to inform their present and future.

The way we order ourselves as a congregation is inherited through a rich tradition. We are a people deeply rooted in tradition, and God calls us to do so not in a way that holds us back.

Diana Butler Bass writes that "Tradition itself is historically constructed and every generation is called to re-examine what they've inherited, reject what needs to be rejected, save what needs to be saved, and add new wisdom to its treasures to be passed on to the next generation, who in turn does the same. Every generation is called not to preserve tradition like a museum, but to craft it anew (like clay)."

Tradition for traditions sake is the easy thing to do. Discernment takes work, takes listening, and requires of us to be curious in the face of change. We can easily shape our ministry and mission to the needs of our fears, comforts and anxiety. But faithful discipleship looks most like allowing God to re-form us by being discerning and attentive to God's Spirit in our midst, crafting a new thing from the old. For what is now old was once new, wasn't it?

At the end of *Fiddler on the Roof*, we see a transformation of Tevye—for in the end he has become the most open to change and new things. This does not mean he has abandoned tradition, precisely just the opposite.

God calls us to honor our traditions and embrace the future with curiosity, not fear or anxiety. To discern and see where God is at work, re-forming us and shaping us for the "is to come". Our God is a God who says both I am who I am, and I will be who I will be. God is a God of our ancestors, of years and traditions past, but *also* our God leads us to look to the future with courage and wisdom.

May it be so with us. Amen.