



Westminster Presbyterian Church

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“I Like Your Tiger”: Joining the Conversation of a Living Tradition

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 5: 17-20, 38-48

Thinking is a conversation the soul has with itself, asking itself questions and answering—Plato, *Theaetetus*, 189e

How can I tell what I think till I see what I say?—E.M. Forster

A vision of the church reformed and always being reformed is one of the gifts the Reformed have to bring to the wider Christian church.—Anna Case-Winters, “Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda,” *Presbyterians Today*, May 2004

As a spiritual movement, the ecumenical movement does not annul tradition, rather it grants a new and more profound insight into what has been handed down once and for all . . . In the end ecumenism is an adventure of the Holy Spirit.—*The Decree on Ecumenism Read Anew After Forty Years*, The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, 2004

Preface to First Scripture Lesson

It was a controversial question in Jesus’ own day and for centuries afterwards: What was Jesus’ relationship to the tradition he was born into—that is, to the law and the prophets? A controversial question, but I think the answer is clear because Jesus answers it clearly. And he does so in the Sermon on the Mount, where he is teaching his followers what it means to be his followers. Listen now for God’s Word: the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5, verses 17-20 . . .

Preface to Second Scripture Lesson

He came not to abolish tradition but to fulfill it. But by way of fulfilling it, Jesus frequently teaches a new understanding of what the tradition says. And in the Sermon on the Mount, it takes the form of: “You have heard that it was said, X; but I say to you Y.” I’ll read two of these, but listen for the last line of the reading also, “Be perfect, therefore . . .

Once again, Jesus is saying that a living tradition is one that leads us to righteousness. Listen now for God’s Word: Matthew 5:38-48 . . .

Sermon

I was talking with our daughter, Anna, on Christmas morning—actually I was FaceTiming with her, and for her, it was Christmas evening.

As many of you know, this past year Anna received a Fulbright award to teach English to high-school students in Thailand for a year. It still amazes that I can see her on a screen—talk to her, no less!—when she’s on the other side of the globe. For that matter, it still amazes me that she’s on the other side of the globe; really, it still amazes that she’s all grown up—how—where—when—did *that* happen?

“We want to come visit,” I was saying to her, “is there anyway way we can learn a little of the language beforehand—you know, is there a Rosetta Stone program for Thai?”

She laughed. “No,” she said, there’s no Rosetta Stone for Thai. For three months, I’ve been saying to my students, ‘I like your tiger.’”

For some time now, Anna has been telling me how hard it is for Westerners to learn Thai. Thai, like Chinese and Vietnamese, is a *tonal* language, meaning that “the same word” can have entirely different meanings depending on how it is pronounced. In total, there are five tones in Thai: Mid-tone, high-tone, low-tone, rising-tone, and falling-tone.

Imagine if the English word “up” had five completely different meanings depending on the tone:

[Mid] “up”;
[High] “up”;
[Low] “up”;
[Rising] “up”; and
[Falling] “up”;

Now imagine you’re a non-native speaker, talking to native speakers, trying to hear those differences. You’d find yourself frequently saying, “pood ek krang dai mai ka?” (that’s Thai for “Can you say that again?”).

So you can see this, can’t you?: Anna’s students, like young people the world over, like to wear t-shirts and hoodies with words and symbols, sports teams’ and corporate logos, etc. on them. Knowing that, and being a teacher, she wanted to connect with them, compliment them. But Thai has the same word for “tiger” and for “shirt,” except that, when you want to say, “tiger,” you go up, and when you want to say, “shirt,” you go down. So she was saying, “I like your tiger,” about their shirts.

“So they correct you when you make a mistake?” I asked after she explained all this to me.

“Oh, no, they’re way too polite for that. But I can tell sometimes when they’re silently correcting me, and then, later, they’ll say the word the right way—just slip it into the conversation—so I can hear the difference—which sometimes, after a while, I do. When I realized I was complimenting them on their tigers, we all laughed about it.”

Later, as I went through that conversation with her in my head, a thought occurred to me—a thought both revelatory, and yes, a little disconcerting. What if it isn’t *just* Anna and her students? What if this doesn’t happen *only* when there’s a pronounced linguistic and cultural difference? What if it happens all the time? What if it’s happening to *me*, even as *I* speak?! What if, for example, in staff meetings, my staff is silently correcting me, too polite to say anything aloud, but then later slipping the right word—a better understanding—into the conversation in hopes that I’ll pick up on it, and think it was my idea? “*Could THAT be possible?*” I asked myself. “Nah,” I thought, “that’s ridiculous.” But still, I have to tell you, the thought stayed with me. And I remembered what I learned from one of my favorite philosophers, namely, that all learning is inherently conversational, “dialogical,” if you want to get fancy about it.

“*Thinking*,” the ancient philosopher Socrates said, [“is a conversation the soul has with itself, asking itself questions and answering.”](#)

Now that may sound a little weird, but if you think about it, it makes sense, makes sense of our experience, that is: I can’t be the only one here who spends a good deal of his day talking to himself, and more than that, when I *am* talking to myself, I’m often having conversations with other people (you can call them imaginary conversations, but they’re real to me), especially people who are no longer around, especially those who have passed away. I can’t be the only one here who still finds himself having conversations with his deceased parents.

“Words,” Socrates said, “lead the soul.” Or as we might say, words get inside us, get in our heads. And those of us who have heard loving, instructive, and gentle words are blessed indeed. In fact, that may be the greatest blessing we can ever receive. And it’s not just an internal, silent, individual dialogue. It’s also external, spoken aloud, shared dialogue. One of the truest marks of true friendship is that we talk together: think, and learn to think together, and so learn to become friends together.

And we need that: “*How can I tell what I think till I see what I say*,” the writer E.M. Forester said. And often we can only tell what we think and only see what we say in spoken conversation with others, and in particular, with friends. That’s what happening between Anna and her students: they are teaching her as much as she is teaching them—in conversation. And it’s cultural as well as linguistic: she taught them about American Christmas and they taught her about Thai New Year. And in that teaching and learning, I know, there is great joy

I have been a teacher, in one way or another, my entire adult life, really since way before that: as a six-year-old, I desperately wanted to take over my first-grade classroom which on occasion, Miss Newstein was kind enough, or tired enough, to let me do. (Hers too is one of the voices I carry around in my head.)

Teaching has given me some of the greatest joy, and (in difficult times) some of the greatest consolation, I have ever known in my life. So I know what the teacher and writer Garret Keizer means when he says that teaching gives him “the kind of rush some people find in skydiving and cocaine.” And teaching has also given me some of the greatest frustration I have ever known in my life. So I also know what Keizer means when he says that for every teacher, “failure [is] a foregone conclusion.”

I can't tell you how many times I have felt like Mr. Lorensax, you know, the Economics teacher in the now classic movie, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. You remember, he's front of the class with the chalkboard behind him, chalk in hand:

“In 1930, the House of Representatives in an effort to alleviate the effects of the [expectant, searching pause, holding chalk]—Anyone? anyone?” And then looking out on that broad blank sea of dazed and dozing, slumped and somnolent student faces, and getting no response, he answers his own question: “*The Great Depression*, and so the House passed the [expectant, searching pause, holding chalk]—“Anyone? anyone?”—answering his own question again “*the Hawley-Smoot Tariff Act* which anyone? Anyone? —Raised or lowered? anyone? anyone? *Raised* tariffs

Sometimes teaching can feel like a monologue and not a dialogue. And I don't mean to throw shade on students by saying that. I've been there; I know what it's like: for the first three months of 9th-grade Geometry I sat there looking at the diagrams Mrs. Kerr was drawing on the board with that some look of blank incomprehension on my face. Failure—my failing the class, that is—seemed like a foregone conclusion. And yet learning does happen. That's the miracle: that learning happens. And I do mean to call it a miracle.

All learning, I'm convinced, is an act of God. And the evidence for that is our human failure rate. If learning were an entirely natural process that we humans could master, if we could reduce learning to a set formula or set of formulae or a technique or set of techniques by which we could, invariably and without fail, produce and reproduce learning, believe me, we would do it. There'd be great advantage to it. But it isn't an entirely natural process, and we can't invariably produce it.

And yet somehow learning does happen. It's a miracle, I tell you. You can outline the entire learning process from beginning to end, using whatever terms you prefer, breaking it down into as many steps as possible, going into as much detail as you can:

Go ahead and talk about synapses firing in the brain, electrical impulses vibrating the vocal chords, air passing through tongue, teeth, and gums, vibrations in the air, eardrums vibrating, fluid and hair moving in the cochlea, auditory nerve fibers transmitting neural signals to the brain which then “translates” them into meaningful sounds and words.

Go ahead: outline the entire process, from beginning to end, as best you can (and that last part about the brain translating might still need some work, neuroscientists): you *still* can't explain why the same process can produce learning at one time and not at another.

Why was it that it wasn't until mid-November that the light bulb finally went on, and I finally began to get Geometry, to see it? By the way, Mrs. Kerr, God rest her soul, gave me a better grade that semester than I deserved. You can say she was being nice, or that she was trying to encourage me. But I think, with that grade, she was saying: “Richard is finally beginning to get Geometry—there is a God.”

We tend to think of miracles as rare, extraordinary, and exceptional occurrences. And no doubt some are. But really, miracles—the acts of God—are all around us. It's just that we've become so accustomed to them, so dull in our incomprehension (anyone? anyone?) that we can't see them. We think it's amazing that people on opposite sides of the globe can communicate via electronic screens, when what's really amazing is that people can communicate at all. It's like realizing your child is all grown up: how—where—when—did *that* happen? It's a miracle. It's only when we begin to see the wonder of our everyday world that we begin to know God.

And so I offer to you, ***The Teachers' Proof for the Existence of God***: Here it is: A student learns something; therefore, God exists and is at work in our world! QED. Whether they know it or not, all teachers believe it, at least implicitly. There is no other—and certainly no better—explanation for learning.

Yes, as I said, all learning is conversational, dialogical, but God *underwrites* and *oversees* those conversations, that dialogue. Which is why Jesus he says to his disciples:

You are not to be called teachers, for you are all students, and you have only one teacher, and that is your Father in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.

And on the night of his arrest, when he knew he was going to leave his disciples, Jesus said to them:
I will not leave you orphaned: the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.

And so Jesus says the same thing to us, even today: the Holy Spirit, sent from the father through the Son, is our one true teacher, always at work, always part of the conversation, however, wherever, whenever we learn. Today we celebrate Heritage Sunday, which means that we have—anyone anyone?—an inheritance. And what we inherit is—anyone, anyone?—a tradition. And our tradition is a living tradition—which means that it is dialogical; it is an ongoing conversation. And we are part of that ongoing conversation.

I love Heritage Sunday. The music and the banners, seeing all of you dressed in your tartans—it stirs my Scottish soul. It takes me back to when I first saw Scotland, on the choir trip: the damp green highlands—seeing the black faces of the sheep and the purple of the thistles through their mist—even now the memory moves me. Heritage Sunday is part of our inheritance, our tradition, at Westminster—a wonderful part.

But the danger is that we think of our heritage as something that happens only once a year *here*; and otherwise happened way back *then* and way over *there*. And that's not true: our inheritance is a living tradition—every day, here and now. And our tradition lives because God gives it life by continuing to teach us through it: that's what Jesus is doing in the Sermon on the Mount. And that's what's happening all the time, even as we speak: the Holy Spirit slipping the right word, a better understanding, into our conversations with one another.

"The Church Reformed and always being reformed."—that motto, that conviction, that rallying cry, is central to our tradition of Scottish Presbyterianism. And it proclaims that our Reformed tradition still lives: God is still at work, reforming it and reforming us.

And it also proclaims that we need not be afraid. Our Reformed tradition has changed and grown. And under the teaching of the Holy Spirit, it will continue to change and grow.

In your bulletins this week, under the sermon title, where we usually put a Bible verse, I put a link to the Study Catechism of the Presbyterian Church USA. A catechism is a dialogical teaching device: cast as a back-and-forth, question-and-answer conversation. And *this* catechism asks and answers questions that mark growth and change in our tradition. For example, Question #11; When the Apostles' Creed speaks of God the Father does that mean God is male? (The answer, by the way, is "no."). Or #27: Does your confession of God as Creator contradict the findings of modern science (The answer again is, "no."). The catechism invites you to join the conversation of a living tradition—and today, Heritage Sunday—is a good day to join it.

And just as we need not be afraid of change and growth in our own tradition, we need not be afraid of interaction even friendship, with other religious traditions. On the front of your bulletin at the bottom, I put a quote from *The Decree on Ecumenism*, from *The Pontifical Council for Christian Unity*—that would be "pontifical," as in the pope. Yes, I put a quote from an official document of the Roman Catholic Church on the cover of our Heritage Sunday bulletin. But before you protest, understand "ecumenism" and "the ecumenical movement" as the effort on the part of religious traditions to grow closer together in friendship, thereby strengthening, and not surrendering, their own unique identities. And now listen to the quote:

As a spiritual movement, the ecumenical movement does not annul tradition, rather it grants a new and more profound insight into what has been handed down once and for all . . . In the end ecumenism is an adventure of the Holy Spirit.

Exactly. And this is exactly what Jesus was doing in the Sermon on the Mount.

And what is true for our religious traditions is also true for our national and secular ones. We needn't be afraid of interaction, even friendship, with other traditions. In 1948, Senator J. William Fulbright said this about the program that was named after him:

The Fulbright Program aims to bring a little more knowledge, a little more reason, and a little more compassion into world affairs and thereby increase the chance that nations will learn at last to live in peace and friendship.

Or as Jesus said: "Do not think that I have come to abolish your traditions; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. . . . Be perfect therefore as your Heavenly Father is perfect."

This is our heritage and our future.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.