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St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
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“...I believe Paul is asking us today: Do you put your faith in Scripture, in Tradition, or in Reason? If you do so without first putting your faith in Christ, you may be missing the point.”

Jeremiah 31: 27-34
2 Timothy 3: 14- 4: 5
Luke 18: 1-8
Psalm 119: 97-104

In the 1940s, actor / singer Bing Crosby recorded a holiday song as part of a film musical. This simple song would go on to become one of the most covered songs and best sellers in recording music history. Whether covered by another recording artist, or want-to-be karaoke star, or sung at an intimate gathering, White Christmas is as ubiquitous as Happy Birthday or Auld Lang Syne, both of which have been sung so many times that counting is rendered futile.

When I say that a song is a cover, you may wonder what do I mean? To cover a song is simply to remix or remake an original artist's rendition with a new performer or with a new arrangement of the primary score. It has been done numerous times to a vast variety of music throughout the ages. This covering of original material by others makes the music come alive for a new generation; this is how I understand tradition.

The basic building block of the Anglican Church, is the ethos of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason. All three held in balance with each other and none of them reigning supreme over the others. At least that is the premise we are taught. Take Tradition for example. Some in the faith community see tradition as being static, something to pass on to others maintaining form and function of the first purveyors of a custom. Every detail of ritual needs to be replicated without error or embellishment. If, however, I apply my understanding of a cover song to tradition, then it becomes something that is passed to a new generation where that generation brings to it its own experience. Each subsequent generation then builds on this exchange renewing and refreshing what has been passed down without altering the original beyond recognition. When

we do this, each generation takes ownership of what has been passed along without fear of needing to maintain an unaltered rendering. Each generation interprets the original in such a way to make it meaningful and relevant to said generation. We should not be slaves to the past, but carriers of historic memory communicating said memory in ways audiences of a different era can understand and take ownership of.

We need therefore to be cautious when we hear that “all scripture is inspired” for these simple words have been used in a myriad of ways to support a literal understanding of our sacred texts, often to the detriment of marginal groups through history. The whole of today’s epistle has been used in such a way for many generations. St. Paul is encouraging Timothy to maintain faith in Christ Jesus in accordance with the Hebrew Canon Timothy is steeped in. Paul, who is most likely writing from prison, is reminding Timothy of a foundational and guiding principle: that every scripture that is inspired by God is useful. That’s what is meant by the phrase “all scripture [is] inspired” when read in its Greek interpretation.

I am going to nerd out on you for a moment, so bear with me – it will lead to a valid point. For starters, there is no “to be” verb in the original Greek. It is implied, but needs to be bracketed in our English translation. Adding to that discovery, is how we translate the word “all” which in Greek is better understood as “every”. Now look at the word inspired and its relation to Scripture; it is better understood as “breathed [into].” Thus, the phrase ‘all Scripture is inspired’ which many translations use, is more accurately read “every Scripture that is breathed into by God is useful.” In other words, the very fact that many bibles today translate that passage in a way that sort of misleads the reader from its original intention is the very thing Paul is cautioning Timothy about. Matter-of-fact, there was no New Testament for Timothy to worry about, as Paul is eluding to the writings he and Timothy grew up with and, for Paul, pointed to Jesus as Messiah. Thus, if we are to “cover” something, tradition or scripture, we must use reason to help us place the matter at hand in its original context. We must be attentive to the original message before we cover it and make it come alive for a new generation. Biblical acumen requires more than a cursory reading of the text. It requires engagement and study; practices Paul is reminding Timothy about.

All too often, we use tradition and scripture, in ways that are detrimental to faith, to an expounding of the faith. Too often it is used to justify injustices that marginalize and persecute vast swaths of society. When it is thus used, tradition and scripture become measuring tools by which we determine who God loves and who God is displeased with.

Our Christian faith is defined by the dictum: love God, love your neighbor, and love yourself. This is not a measuring stick of judgment against which we are held as much as it is about faithfulness in living and giving witness to the message of love, for “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” (1 Jn 16) That message has not changed; how we give witness to the message may need to adapt to the cultural we are immersed in in order for people to hear the message anew. It is not that the Church or God’s message through Christ is even irrelevant. It is not. It is how the message is communicated that is important.

We are tasked as followers of Christ to give voice to our faith in word and deed. There will be times when we are challenged to give in to the historian whose desire is for exact replication or to opportunists who dismiss the past completely and charge forth claiming authenticity. Paul reminds Timothy of the danger each of those paths lead to as they are not faithful to the kerygma, the essential truth of Christ Jesus. How we express our faith is important. However, it is not the accouterments of faith that are so much important as it is to have faith in Christ Jesus. This is not about pious piety. It is about a transformed life in Christ.

All that is breathed by God is useful. Useful for the building up of the community, for the guiding of the community, even for admonishing the community when necessary. It is not to be used as a litmus test or measuring tool. If it is truly breathed by God, it’s only use is to love and build up, not divide and tear down. That is the message Paul is communicating to Timothy. A not so subtle reminder that faith in Christ Jesus is the essential truth. Thus, I believe Paul is asking us today: Do you put your faith in Scripture, in Tradition, or in Reason? If you do so without first putting your faith in Christ, you may be missing the point. So then, where does your faith lie?