Sunday, September 28, 1980
WHY DO YOU BREAK TRADITION?
Matthew 15:1-11

Many of us — to the extent that we bother to think about the future at all — assume the world we know will last indefinitely. We find it difficult to imagine a different way of life for ourselves. Therefore, we are afraid of almost any change in the way of doing things and this includes our religion.

At the same time, we recognize that things are changing. But we assume that today's changes will somehow pass us by and that nothing will shake the familiar economic, political and religious framework in which we live. We expect the future to be nothing more than a continuation of the present.

This kind of thinking can be found in almost every area of our lives. It often appears as an unexamined assump-tion lying behind the decisions of businessmen, teachers, parents, church leaders, economists and politicians. At a more sophisticated level, this kind of thinking comes dressed up in statistics, computerized data, and fore- caster's jargon. Either way, it adds up to a vision of a future world that is essentially more of the same.

There are others who have a different image of the future and of change. As crisis after crisis has hit the head- lines, the trouble in Iran and now the trouble between Iran and Iraq, energy shortages, uninterrupted inflation, terrorism, recession and more; some have a very bleak view of the future. Large numbers of people — fed on a steady diet of bad news, disaster movies, apocalyptic Bible stories, have apparently concluded that today's society will not be continued into the future. For them, Armageddon is only minutes away. The earth is racing to- ward its final cataclysmic explosion.

At first glance, these two views of the future seem very different. Yet both produce similar psychological and political effects. For both lead to a paralysis of imagination and will. If tomorrow's society is simply an enlarged version of the present, there is little we need to do to prepare for it. If on the other hand the world is going to self-destruct within our lifetime, there is nothing we can do about it. Thus, both of these ways of looking at the future keep us from looking for new answers and for new direction — they lead to inaction.

But there is yet another way of looking at the future and at change. We need not be limited by the simple-minded choice between Armageddon and "more-of-the-same." A Biblical point of view suggests that the future is never just more of the same. History cannot be frozen in any particular period. Throughout the story of the Bible it-self, we see massive change and it is the faith of the Hebrews and the Christians that God is involved in this change. The Bible does not assume that the future is merely going to be more of the same.

History also teaches us this. A look at history shows that in the past every person, business enterprise or nation that simply assumed that the world of the future was going to be more of the same, failed.

Right now, we are aware of the trouble that American automobile manufacturers are having because of their assump-tion that the world would be the same — that there would always be a large market for big automobiles. Some years ago, the makers of manual typewriters assumed that there would always be a market for manual typewriters, so they laughed at the

inventor of the electric typewriter when he tried to sell them his patent. That inventor then took his invention to a little-known company which was then not manufacturing typewriters and that company is now known as IBM.

Similar mistakes have been made and are still being made in the economic and political arena. It's false to assume that the Russians are always going to be the same, or that all Communist nations are the same. Fortunately, we've changed some of our assumptions about the Chinese. I believe it's false to assume that the only way to peace is by spending more and more on defense. Why is it that we are always so afraid to re-examine our basic assumptions? It's only when we do that, we begin to find new solutions.

In a new biography of Lyndon Johnson, by Merle Miller, President Johnson is quoted as saying in 1969, after he left office and as he was reflecting back on the Vietnam Crisis, "I never felt I had the luxury of re-examining my basic assumptions. Once the decision was made to commit military force, all our energies were turned to vindicating that choice and finding a way to somehow make it work." And therein, says the author, is the heart of that tragedy in a nutshell.

Re-examining one's basic assumptions is never a luxury; it is a necessity! It's necessary in business, in politics, in economics, in education, in medicine, and of course in religion. It's the only way we can deal with and manage change. At one point in history, it was necessary for we human beings to re-examine the assumption that the world was flat. We've had to re-examine the assumption that heavier than air machines could not fly. We've had to re-examine the assumption that the earth was the center of the universe. For years it was assumed that infection after surgery was not caused by the surgeon's dirty hands or the unsterilized equipment. Thank God that assumption was re-examined!

Too often we have to be forced to look again at our basic assumptions. Much tragedy and many crises could be avoided if we willingly re-examined our basic assumptions.

All of this is related to the question that the Pharisees and Scribes asked Jesus one day. They asked, "Why do your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat."

The Pharisees and Scribes were operating on several basic assumptions that needed to be re-examined. One assumption was that all tradition is good and should never be broken. Another assumption was that God is interested in our little religious rules and rituals. But Jesus Christ gave them and us a whole new set of basic assumptions about God.

God is not interested primarily in our solemn assemblies and our rituals - but as the prophet Amos said, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

God is interested in how we treat people more than whether or not we have ritually washed our hands before a meal.

Again and again, Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to the people of old, but I'm giving you a whole new set of assumptions about God, for I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

“Why do your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders?” This question is always being asked in all ages and among all people. “Why do you break tradition, or another way of asking the question is, “Why do you question our basic assumptions?”

Questioning basic assumptions, breaking long-time traditions is always controversial. The Broadway musical and later tl1.e movie, ‘•Fiddler on the Roof” is about this very issue. One of the songs is entitled, “Tradition” which the father sings as he is trying to deal with the changes going on around him and in his family. He is asking the question we all ask at time, “Why can’t you just do things the way they’ve always been done? Why can’t you let the village matchmaker choose your husband? Why don’t you follow in the vocation of your father? Why don’t women realize their place is in the home? Why are women driving trucks, becoming police officers, firefighters, and physicians? Why do you break the traditions of society?

We don’t like to have our basic assumptions questioned because when they are questioned, change is usually implied. But the world is changing and is going to continue to change. This does not mean that all change is necessarily good or bad. We always have to make distinctions. But sometimes instead of just fighting the change, we need to go with it and guide it and direct it so that we can make the best of it.

Take the matter of the family for example. It’s an institution that has been and continues to undergo radical change. It doesn’t help very much just to bemoan the changes, rather we have to first try to understand some of the reasons for the change and then try to guide it and make good come out of it.

Before the industrial revolution, the family was a different kind of institution. Wherever agriculture was the main occupation, people tended to live in large, expanded, or extended households, with uncles, aunts, in-laws, grand- parents j or cousins all 1iving under the same roof or in the same neighborhood or village. Most families worked together as an economic production unit as well as being a family. Families were for the most part immobile, tied to the soil or to the village where they grew up. Some families ran small businesses and often lived above or within walking distance. People didn’t often move. My father, for example, never has lived more than five miles from where he was born, and he is now 81 years old.

But as our nation and others became more industrialized, families felt the stress of change and are still feeling it. As economic production shifted from the field to the factory, the family no longer worked as a production unit. To free workers for factory labor, key functions of the family were given over to new specialized institutions. Education of children was turned over to the schools, care of the aged was turned over to poorhouses, or old-age homes, or nursing homes. Above all the new society -required mobility. It needed workers who would follow jobs from place to place.

Burdened with elderly relatives, the sick, the handicapped, and large numbers of children, the extended family was anything but mobile. Gradually and painfully the family structure began to change and is sti11 changing. Relation-ships were altered between parents and children. Authority shifted.

The nuclear family came into being in contrast to the larger extended family — father, mother and several children. This group could move across the country and take new jobs. But now basic assumptions about the family had to be questioned. It used to be assumed that the family would care for its own elderly until they died — but if the son had a job in California and

lived in a small apartment or small house and the parents lived in Michigan, it became more and more difficult for the son to take care of his father and mother.

Our society is not going to return to the pre-industrial era. Rather it will go beyond the present industrial era into some new again and that too will change some basic assumptions about the family as well as other institutions in society. So, we have to continually be finding new ways to deal with the family instead of just asking like the Pharisees and Scribes, “Why do you break the old tradi-tions?”

Our Christian faith and our Hebrew heritage continually call us to question our basic assumptions and to not simply be afraid of change or afraid of the new. Christ calls us to re-examine our old assumptions in the light of new experience. It’s not an easy task and it’s often a painful one, but it’s one of the ways we were meant to grow.

How I wish Lyndon Johnson had known that in the sixties. The whole shape of our nation and the world might have been different had this been so. And how I wish our presidential candidates knew this. Sometimes I have the feeling that all political campaigns are based on old assumptions which we are afraid to re-examine.

One of my heroes as a politician and leader is Mahatma Gandhi. One day a belligerent young man said to him, “You have no integrity! Last week I heard you say one thing, today you are saying something different. How do you justify such vacillation?” To which Gandhi replied, “It’s really quite simple my son, I have learned something since last week.”

God is always making things new, according to the Bible. Thus, God calls us to look again at many of our basic assumptions and then we won’t be so afraid of the new and of change. Amen.