

We live in a society that has taught us life really begins with the next choice. That's why we keep saying, "If only..." It starts when you are a teenager saying, "If only I can get out of the house and go to college..." But before the four years are over, you're saying, "If only I can get out of college and get a job..." which then becomes, "If only I could get a real job...", "which soon evolves into, "If only I could get a different job..." and so it continues. Or maybe you're saying, "If only I can get into a relationship..." or maybe out of a relationship, or into a different relationship. Others are saying, "If only we could have children..." but eventually that changes to, "If only the kids would leave home..." Still others are thinking, "If only I could retire..." while others are saying, "If only I could figure out what to do with retirement..." You can move from one "If only" wish to another all the way into the nursing home, where you'll find yourself saying, "If only I had made different choices."

Never before in the history of civilization have people known as many freedoms as we enjoy. And never before have people struggled so desperately to know what to do with it. Freedom is always a temptation to be preoccupied with the next choice, purchase, move, promotion, or self-improvement strategy, which is all a way of just rearranging the furniture of your life, unless you choose to use your freedom to fulfill a calling.

The book of Deuteronomy contains Moses' last sermon to the Hebrews before he dies. They will soon cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land without him, so he no doubt chose these last words very carefully. The people's days of slavery are long behind them, and they are about to live in freedom, but Moses realized that if they didn't know what to do with their freedom it would consume their fleeting years. So in the most important part of his sermon he says, *Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one God. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.* That's the calling—to use life in the love of God. But as Moses makes clear in the rest of the sermon, when he talks about loving God he isn't talking so much about a feeling as a devotion. To love God is to live out of the Ten Commandments the people received on their way to the Promised Land. These commandments were signposts to freedom, which guided the people with a holy calling to live faithfully to their one God and to live justly with their neighbor.

When Jesus offers his commentary on the law of God, he said that in essence it boils down to loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself. So, our calling is to use our freedoms not to choose a life we finally like, but to lose our lives in compassion, which ironically is how we discover a life we can love.

But Moses goes on: *You shall teach these words diligently to your children. Talk about them when you are home and when you are away; when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand; fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.* In other words, Moses is telling us to inculcate our calling in a holy tradition, so that each generation confronts it in their going and coming. These words of Moses are called the "Shema." We know that by at least the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE it was repeated twice a day in every devout home—morning and night. The families would gather and go through the same liturgy: *Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one God, and you shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, and with all of your mind.* Now don't you think some young Jewish kids just rolled their eyes and said, "Ugh! This is so dumb. Why do we keep doing this same tradition?" It is not unlike the protests my parents heard every Sunday from the back seat as they hauled me to church for worship, Sunday School, Youth Group, Mission Days, and Potluck Dinners where I just kept hearing my sacred calling to love God and love my neighbor. They couldn't make me believe in that calling, but they could make me believe that we believe in it.

When our kids grow older, like prodigals they may leave our traditions for a while. But when life gets hard, and it will, the tradition is in them—they can always come back to it if they want. What I worry about are those who

were never given a tradition worthy of rebelling against. These are the ones who are on their own to somehow put together life without a tradition offering them a higher calling.

Tradition is not a conservative effort to hang onto the past. Our biblical tradition is a progressive force that is constantly adapting and reforming to a changing society. Our theology reforms, our worship reforms, our mission and our work as a church in the world is free to reform, precisely because we have inherited a clear and compelling story to our lives, which is to love an unchanging God and demonstrate that love to an ever-changing world.

When my daughter graduated from her university, I was stunned to hear the commencement speaker offer the same dribble I heard when I graduated from college. He looked out over five thousand graduates and said, "You are the brightest and best we have ever seen. Set your goals high, dream your own dreams, chase your own star, and you can be whatever you want to be." He might as well have said, "I'm sorry. We have nothing for you. You're on your own to put it together the best you can."

Since we bought into that line for the last couple of generations, we are now constantly dominated by a mission to improve our lives. All week long we are thinking about my job, my health, my money, my kids, my life that isn't working out. As you drive home from work you think no one in the office appreciates how hard I work. When you get home, and walk in the door, the family does not stand and sing the Doxology, and you think I am not appreciated here either. By the end of the week, we've become intoxicated with ourselves, when we get caught in traffic, we say crazy stuff like, "Why are they doing this to me?" It's me, me, me, every day all week. By the time I get to church on Sunday morning, I am sick and tired of me. I'm ready to hear a better story than I can write for myself. I need to hear about God's drama with the world and how my life can get caught up in it.

This is why our tradition interprets your life biblically. Your life didn't begin when you left home, or when you got married, or employed or retired, or even when you were born. According to the opening page of the Bible the first words about your life were, "In the beginning God." That means life is not something we achieve, but something we receive from the Creator. Just as the Spirit of God once moved over the face of the deep, shoving aside darkness and chaos, creating light and beauty in its place, so does that Creative Spirit continue to unfold a good work in your work. If you get frightened or confused about your life, just skip to the end of the book in Revelation like you would to see how a mystery novel resolves. It gets a little scary just before the end of the book, but the ending is glorious. God makes a home among mortals in a holy city with a river of life running through it. Out of the river is a tree with leaves for the healing of the nations. The ending is already written. Nothing you are going to do can make it end any better or worse. But knowing how the story of life on this earth is going to end inspires our mission and makes us refuse to settle for the violent world we have today. And the best part of the story is when God became flesh and dwelled among us in Jesus Christ, and we beheld the grace of a Savior dying to love us.

To be clear, we are not trying to take this whole drama of God relevant to you. We are trying to make you relevant to it. Marva Dawn, who writes compellingly about worship tells the story of a person who greeted the pastor at the door following the worship service to complain, "I didn't much care for that second hymn we sang today." The pastor just smiled and said, "That's okay. We weren't singing to you."

Worship is finally the place where it is not about me. It is about Holy, Holy, Holy. It is about a better drama than I can write. It is about a calling we have received. And on this All Saints Sunday we remember it is about a tradition we have inherited. This is a tradition passed down from prophets, patriarchs and matriarchs, apostles, martyrs, saints and sinners, ordinary people who have already faced everything we possibly could, and whose faith was hammered out on the anvil of adversity. But they kept coming to this Lord's Table to find communion with God, and communion with those who died in the faith, and communion with those around the world who are in dire trouble. And in continuing that tradition of communing with the love of God and the love of our neighbor we remember who we are and whose we are. Amen.