

One of my favorite movies from last year was the Disney film, *Moana*. Moana is the daughter of the chief of a Polynesian village of Motonui on a beautiful Pacific island.

These Polynesian islanders prize their traditions. In the opening song, they sing of the importance of preserving their ancient way of life. They tell Moana,

*The village of Motonui is all you need
The dancers are practicing
They dance to an ancient song
Who needs a new song?
This old one's all we need
This tradition is our mission...
The island gives us what we need*

And yet, young Moana feels discontented. She loves her family. She loves her village and her people. And yet, she also feels an almost irresistible urge to venture out upon the open ocean. She longs to sail the seas. And yet, her father and the villagers tell her to be faithful to their island traditions.

*Who needs a new song?
This old one's all we need
This tradition is our mission...
The island gives us what we need*

This is the 6th and final week of our sermon series about the ancient Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed. These 1,700 and 1,800-year-old statements capsule and crystalize many important things about our Christian tradition. They tell us much about the faith that has been handed down to us.

The creeds tell us of God the Father who created all that is, seen and unseen. The creeds tell us of God the Holy Spirit who spoke to and through our ancestors in the past, and who continues to bring life and inspiration today.

But most importantly, and in the largest sections of both creeds, the Nicene and Apostles' Creed speak of the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As I said in weeks past, there are two bedrock beliefs about Jesus Christ that the early church had. These bedrock beliefs are preserved in these creeds.

Both of these beliefs were part of the earliest proclamation of our ancestors in the faith. And both of these beliefs are challenged in our 21st century society.

In fact, there's a myth out there that these beliefs were made up centuries later and added onto the Christian faith as unfortunate innovations. But as I said in weeks past, these two core statements actually date back to the earliest writings in the New Testament, and form the bedrock of the early church's proclamation even before the New Testament began to be written down.

These two core beliefs are that Jesus Christ is somehow God dwelling among us as a human being, and that this same Jesus Christ was executed, and yet somehow rose from the dead.

Now you can believe that both of these ideas are primitive, or crazy. But you cannot say they were added on later. They were part of the earliest proclamation of the church. Early Christians went to their deaths in order to affirm their belief in the truth of both of these claims.

These beliefs were passed down. They were eventually written down and collected in the works we now call the New Testament. And they were later summarized in the works we call the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds.

In the Apostles' Creed, we proclaim that we believe in the Communion of Saints. In other words, we believe that those early witnesses to God's presence in Jesus Christ, those witnesses to the new life he offered by raising Jesus from the dead... we believe that those early witnesses are still alive with God

Our lesson today from the 7th chapter of Revelation speaks of this communion of saints, as "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."¹ They stand in the presence of God, they stand in the presence of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, offering praise and worship and prayers.

Many of them are martyrs who, in the words of Revelation, "washed their robes white in the blood of the Lamb."² They gave their lives to proclaim the faith that the Lamb, that Jesus, was slain, and yet he is alive still. And Revelation says they share in his life. They bask in Jesus' divine presence. They share in his Resurrection.

And yet the Communion of Saints is not only made up of these ancient martyrs and witnesses. It is made up of succeeding generations of Christians as well. The communion of saints includes those who continued to pass down this faith.

And it includes those whom we have known in our lives. It includes those who have passed down the faith to us. Parents. Grandparents. Teachers. Faithful clergy.

In my life, many of the saints who have passed down the faith to me have died. And yet as Christians, we bask in the firm belief that they are with us still, that they are part of that great multitude no one can number gathered around God's throne. On All Saints Day, we give thanks for those whom we have known and loved who have passed down the faith to us. We celebrate the Communion of Saints who have passed the baton to us, who have entrusted to us the faith that had once been entrusted to them. This tradition is our mission.

¹ Revelation 7:9

² Revelation 7:14

And yet there is a problem we sometimes perceive with tradition. We ask in every generation, "Does it really apply to us?" Is there any reason for us to continue to proclaim these old traditions? Are they still relevant in our modern world?

Maybe we should water them down. Maybe we should edit them. Maybe we should take out anything that seems offensive or difficult in our culture and turn the richness of the Christian faith into some sort of baby food that might be easier to digest.

But I do not believe this is the way for us to go. Not just because people have died to pass down these tradition to us. But because these traditions continue to offer life and hope and good news: the good news of the God who loved us so much that he became one of us; the good news that not even death itself is strong enough to conquer the love of God made known in Christ Jesus.

Our spiritual elders have passed down to us songs and stories and testimony and prayers that are a tremendous treasure. And they are still of immense value today.

But, there is a mistake we sometimes make when it comes to traditions. We start to enshrine traditions for the sake of traditions. We see them as ends in themselves rather than as means to an end. We turn tradition into traditionalism. We idolize the traditions themselves rather than the living God to whom these traditions point.

One great modern church historian and theologian says it this way:

"Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living..."

"Tradition is the living faith of the dead."³

"Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living..."

"Tradition is the living faith of the dead."

And he adds, "It is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name."⁴

We can and probably should dispense with traditionalism. But we need to double down on proclaiming the core of our tradition.

God loves us so much that he became one of us. And not even death itself is strong enough to conquer the love of God made known in Jesus Christ.

These days we are surrounded by cultural seas that are increasingly hostile to such a message. The waves of our culture have little concern for the traditions of our faith. Do we huddle down in our churches and ignore the culture around us? Do we stay on little islands of Christianity in the midst of secular seas?

Or can we remember a greater tradition? Can we remember the baton that has been passed down to us? That baton is the good news that our culture still desperately needs. Our

³ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition*

⁴ Pelikan, *ibid.*

ancestors in the faith ventured forth on hostile cultural waters. They carried the baton, the good news of life and love far and wide into their world. They went from about 120 followers at the time of the Resurrection⁵ to more than 2 billion followers today. They knew who they were. They were followers of the Way. They were followers of the one who called himself the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Even before they took his name for their movement, even before they called themselves Christians, first, they called themselves the followers of the Way.⁶

In the 2016 movie *Moana*, there is a blight that has spread to Moana's island. It is dying. Moana is told, "Now we have forgotten who we are, and the darkness has continued to spread... draining the life from island after island."

"Now we have forgotten who we are." Weren't they preserving their traditions? Weren't they passing them down?

Well not quite. At least not completely. They had forgotten a part of their identity. They had forgotten a part of who they were.

They were Polynesians. They were part of the greatest sea-faring culture in the history of our planet. A people with stone-age technology who skillfully sailed the vast waters of the Pacific. A people who navigated across huge swaths of our planet. A people who settled on more than 1,000 islands scattered over 16 million square miles of ocean. That's an area five times larger than the lower 48 continental United States.

Moana is given a vision of this deeper identity. At one of the pivotal moments of the movie, her ancestors sing to her their triumphant song about their ancient sea-faring practices:

*We read the wind and the sky when the sun is high
We sail the length of the seas on the ocean breeze
At night, we name every star
We know where we are
We know who we are*

They were great explorers. They were great ocean voyagers.

They eventually spread their culture across the Pacific, even to far distant places like Tahiti and Hawaii. They spread so far that early European explorers were mystified as to how they did it. English captain James Cook thought there must have been land bridges that later sank, because surely, no "primitive" people could possibly achieve such a marvel of navigation. And yet, that's exactly what the Polynesians did.

In *Moana*, the young heroine ventures out onto the oceans on an epic quest. She learns the ways of her ancestors, the deeper traditions that her people had forgotten.

*We are explorers reading every sign
We tell the stories of our elders in a never-ending chain...*

⁵ Acts 1:15

⁶ See Acts 9:2, 18:25, 22:4, 24:14

*And when it's time to find home,
We know the way.*

Moana returns home with her new knowledge, which is really the ancient knowledge. And she leads her people to new life. They venture back out onto the oceans and pass on these rediscovered and renewed traditions.

They are not stuck with the traditionalism of their island. They venture forth with a renewed deeper sense of their identity. They carry with them their rediscovered ancient traditions.

The ideas in the Creeds are not dead traditionalism. They are vibrant and living tradition. They tell us of the love of God and the life God brings us. They tell us of the love we have to offer to those around us so that they may share in God's life as well.

The saints who have gone before us have passed these things down to us. And we are called to pass them on. Not because we're stuck in traditionalism. But because we have been passed the baton, we have been entrusted with the Good News of Jesus Christ and the love and life he offers.

Today (at 10:30) we are baptizing Mark Barhanovich into our continuing tradition and faith.

Decades ago I knew his mother, Devin Kopp Barhanovich when she was a toddler. I even taught her at one point in Vacation Bible School, assisting some faithful older saints who have now died, and who are yet with us as part of the Communion of Saints.

Last summer, I had the honor to preside at Devin's wedding to Steve. And today I have the honor to baptize their young son. Devin and Steve will make promises to hand the faith they have received down to young Mark as he grows.

Yes, they will share family stories of Mark's late Grandfather, Mark, and others who have gone before. But they are also called to share the stories of our faith, the good news our elders in the faith have passed down to us.

That's what it means to be part of the Jesus movement, part of the Christian Church. That's what it means to be the followers of the Way.

We believe in the Communion of saints.
We tell the stories of our elders in a never-ending chain

We believe that our loving God created us and the world we live in.
We know where we are

We believe that we have been called by this God. For us, he came down from heaven to be one of us. For us, he was crucified and was raised. And he calls us to be agents of his love and his life in our world.

We know who we are, who we are

We believe in the Communion of Saints.

We proclaim God's love that brings forgiveness of sins.

We believe in the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come.

And when it's time to find home

We know the way

We know the Way.