

### *The Familiar*

Every family has its traditions. My family certainly does, among them going to Washington's Crossing every year on Christmas Day for the reenactment of that historic event. We've done that long enough now that I think it qualifies as an official Garner family tradition, just like your family, I'm sure, has its traditions. In fact, having such traditions is one of the things that makes you a family, every bit as much as your shared DNA. Which is why a family's traditions are as unique to that family as one's fingerprints, and why marrying into a family means marrying into that family's distinctive traditions. God help you if you should choose to opt out.

But by traditions, I don't just mean the special traditions like the things we do on holidays like Christmas or Thanksgiving, or on family vacations, though that *is* how we normally use the word. But traditions can also include all the normal routines that a family has, including all the little things that we do every single day. For example, who sits where at the breakfast table (even if you're sitting there all by yourself!), or who drives the car on family outings, or what you have for dinner on Sunday nights, or how you make sandwiches. That sort of stuff. Even how, and how often, you brush your teeth. Of course, no one calls brushing your teeth a tradition, but in a very real sense, it is. If you don't think so, just try getting someone to change how they do it.

In other words, traditions are all those things we do, both special and routine, that are familiar, which of course literally means "of our family." It's only human nature to begin to equate all those traditions, all those things that are so familiar to us, the way we do things day in and day out, with the truth, that is to say, with the way those things are *supposed* to be done. That is the point made in the quote printed on the cover of our bulletin today, and truer words were never spoken. Which then is why traditions are both a source of strength *within* a family, by holding things together in an orderly, predictable and secure fashion, but at the same time a source of potential conflict with just about everyone else, with everyone *outside* your family or clan, all those whose traditions are not the same as yours and therefore are not familiar to you, and sure aren't the truth, at least not in your eyes.

This "collision" of traditions is a problem that we all have to deal with from time to time in our lives, for example, when we go off to college and have to share a room with a complete stranger, or when get married, or simply when we move to a different part of the country. All of a sudden, the things that are so familiar to us, things that we take completely for granted, are not familiar to everyone else, are not anyone else's traditions, not what they think is the right way to do things, and what do you do then? Of course, when you're eighteen years old, that's all kind of exciting. When you're sixty five years old like me, it's not so exciting.

This is the problem that the apostle Paul struggled with his entire career, at least from the time he began to preach among the Gentiles, because when he started bringing Gentiles home for dinner (so to speak), there was often trouble. Trouble in particular between Jews and Gentiles, but also conflicts I'm sure between Romans and Corinthians, between Ephesians and Galatians, between Philippians and Colossians. All of them people with different traditions and therefore different ideas of the truth, of the way things are supposed to be. Nothing strange about that, it's just human nature. Just the way we are.

Losing sight of that fact can cause problems when reading Paul's letters. We're always trying to turn them into theological treatises, and by doing so overlook the fact that quite often Paul is not talking so much theologically as he is just dealing with very practical matters having to do with problems in a congregation. A good example of what I'm talking about is our epistle lesson today from the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans, a chapter that is notoriously difficult to make sense of. In large part, I think, because we read this, and certainly all the commentaries read this, as a theological treatise on grace vs. works of the law as the means of justification, of how we become righteous in the eyes of God. At some level that may well be so, but if that's all we see here, we're ignoring the surely relevant fact that the "law" was not just a theological concept, it was *tradition* for those in the Roman church who like Paul came from a Jewish background. As their tradition, it's how they lived their lives, it's what they were familiar with, and at that gut level, it was very much the truth. For them.

But not for Gentiles, for whom the law, i.e. the Jewish law, was most certainly not their tradition, not the way they lived their lives, not what they were familiar with, and for sure not their truth. So you can just imagine what it was like trying to get everyone in the church at Rome to agree on the menu for their congregational meals. I mean, when Paul says here, "the law brings wrath," he wasn't kidding, and he wasn't being particularly theological either. He was just stating the obvious, what happens when someone tries to force their traditions on someone else, or when someone else tries to force their traditions on you. When that happens, you're going to have trouble. It's the kind of trouble, frankly, the kind of *wrath*, that can stir things up so much that it blinds everyone involved to the much more significant truths where you may be in complete agreement, things of utmost importance.

Which is where—for Paul—grace comes in, and not just God's grace either. This is the kind of situation that comes up all the time in churches, almost anytime that anyone wants to change anything, and when that happens, everyone has to show a little bit of grace and not try to force our traditions on everyone else, or expect everyone else to do things exactly like we do. At times, maybe even give a little bit on some of our own traditions, in order to make it easier for others to do the same, not because such graciousness or tolerance is an end in itself but because it helps us to maintain the unity of the larger body on the matters that are most important to us, the things that we can all agree on. In Rome, that meant keeping focused on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and not getting hung up on who was eating what, or in our day, getting hung up on who was marrying whom. But again, that's very hard to do when someone is messing with your traditions, with the way you've done things your whole life, with what's familiar.

Which is just one more reason why it's so important for us to keep our eyes on the big picture, on the long term, on the concerns of the Spirit, rather than those of what Paul calls the flesh, meaning all the stuff of daily life. Which is what I think the argument between Jesus and Nicodemus in our gospel lesson this morning is really all about. Nicodemus here is trying to bring Jesus back within the fold, calling him back to what is familiar, to the traditions they were both raised with. I can just see him putting his arm around Jesus, and saying, "Jesus, we know you're a man of God," meaning by that you're one of *us*. But Jesus, keenly aware that the spirit of God was at work in the world doing something new, something really big, is not interested in going back, in going "home" as it were. He's moving on, moving on into the new world that the spirit is at work bringing about. Poor Nicodemus, though, is so stuck in the familiar, in the tradition, that he can't see what the spirit is doing, what is happening in the world around him, where things are headed. I think that's very often true of all of us. We love our traditions, and

for good reason. They're what is familiar, they're the glue that holds our family together, and they really do provide us with a strong sense of security. That's no small thing and it's never easy to let go of that, and for good reason.

But there are times in all our lives when we've got to let go of what's familiar, of what we're used to, what we're most comfortable with, in order to move on into the world where the Spirit of God is leading us. That's what Abraham so famously did, and not just once but several times over the long course of his life, times when he picked up and left behind everything that was familiar—even his family—to move on to a land where nothing was familiar. Except for one thing, and that was God. Which is why we call it faith.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,  
to whom be all glory and honor, now and forever...*