

What's your favorite tradition?

Traditions are the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation, or the fact of something being passed on in a certain way. Nearly every family has traditions. What traditions did you have as a family growing up? Family traditions may relate to holidays, but they can also be associated with special days. Did you make a particular dish during Christmas or for a birthday celebration? Making cards for your mom on Mother's Day? Did you stand on a chair and help your Gramma bake cookies or pies and now you share that experience with your child, loved one or friend? Is there a certain shirt you wear to cheer on your favorite team? Say a particular prayer at dinner or bedtime? Fourth of July parades, parties, BBQ or fireworks. Your own family board or card game night?

We all have different reactions to traditions: some people are all in and some people roll their eyes. The traditions that get under my skin are the ones we do just because that's the way we've always done them. They might have had meaning at one point, but now we're just going through the motions.

Which makes traditions tricky, because traditions are habits. I have a blended family, which means we've combined some traditions and made new ones. We have new traditions and old family traditions, and we're trying to figure out how to combine them all to make them our own. As it goes on for years, it is really cool when those traditions become a habit, when they begin to create meaning and we begin to look forward to it. Learning how it marks us as a family; watching it move from generation to generation. Traditions don't just happen overnight or just once, they take time, to become meaningful and special.

We have traditions as God's people too. Hymns we sign to worship, reading the Bible, prayer, scripture memorizing, passing the peace and welcoming others into fellowship with us, the benediction at the end of the service, fasting or serving others on Sunday and throughout our week.

Traditions, love them or leave them, make up who we are. Our habits shape us into what we are. Family blends and bonds have made a mark on us and who we have become today. It marks the people we are.

Today, we're going to explore some habits of the young church. We'll listen to how these habits made them a spiritual family, and consider how they can mark out traditions that shape us as the church we have become today. Let's begin by standing together this morning and worshipping this God, singing and following in the tradition of praising our God!

Message:

This is the season of Epiphany, when we celebrate that the God who came to us at Christmas is not only for us, but for the whole world. This year, our Epiphany series is called "Church Words with Friends". We've been exploring some of those words Christians use that can be confusing. Words like "Gospel" that are unique to Christianity. Or words like "grace" or "blessed" that pretty much everyone uses, but no one is exactly sure what they're supposed to mean. Our goal is to understand our faith better so that we can be better conversation partners with our friends and neighbors outside the Church.

And since friends are so nice, we've been doing two words each week. By learning these 'church words' together, we'll uncover new dimensions to our faith.

We began with God & Trinity, and discovered that when we say God is Trinity, we're saying God is most essentially self-giving love. God created us to join in giving ourselves in love to each other. Next, we talked about Gospel and Incarnation and saw that what makes Jesus worthy of our worship, what proves he is a god worth following, is that he demonstrates his love by becoming one of us, giving up his divine privileges and sacrificing himself for us. After that came Wrath and Atonement, and we saw that the cross isn't about God taking a Xanax or punishing Jesus instead of us. Rather, it's about God loving us enough to save us from ourselves. The words Grace and Blessed illustrated that the life God saves us for is a life where we are present to God and to each other. And last week, we dove into the idea of salvation, saw that it's not a single point in the past, but an ongoing work that God invites us into.

We saw last week that Paul gave the Church at Philippi some challenging advice - to "work out our salvation". For Paul, embodying the virtues Jesus himself demonstrated was how we show the world who God is, how we live as citizens of God's kingdom.

Today, we're going to press deeper into that insistence Paul has that salvation present - what we call sanctification - happens when we follow Jesus together. And we'll get help from our words for this week - three of them: Faith, Hope and Love. We call these the "Cardinal virtues" because, according to Paul, they are the most important. Remember last week when we had that whole big list of virtues? Look at what Paul says elsewhere - and don't worry: this verse is going to sound really familiar:

Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love. -- 1 Corinthians 13:13

This is a super popular verse, you could have even finished it for me. And the greatest of ...

We find these words used around us all of the time. Social media feeds, tattoos, Enneagram lists, movies, key chains, commercials, tshirts, coffee cups, car stickers, the radio playlist alone every day has a song with love or George Micheal's song "You gotta have faith".

Love: it is so gross, so generic. Love is sentimental. Love conquers all. It is found on a store shelf made of paper or chocolate. We just came off a holiday just for love; I literally watched teenagers walk around with life sized teddy bears and balloons! I love, love. I really do. This word has just become so trite. It is a word thrown around by so many to show love for someone or a "something". I know your eyes are rolling and you are thinking in your seats of a Hallmark movie or a happy ending! Oh yes, and this mom is standing in front of us this morning talking about love and here she is in her LOVE shirt she bought, with her Caleb and Caleigh mug and hope necklace. I get it; that is how I felt too when the three words with Christian friends came up in our preaching team meeting. But I assure you this is not what I want to make you feel and hear today. Don't get me wrong my children and marriage are my greatest blessings and the ones I love more than anything in this world, but I do not want to just convey the cheesy romantic love today. I want to convey the forever, ultimate, never ending love that God gives us every day.

We sure do get excited about this type of mushy love, but they are at different spectrum or points in marriage or in your relationships. We did at one point have all of this mushy sweet tooth love, but we don't sit with these feelings during every day of special relationships.

It's not that Valentine's Day is bad. Celebrate your Galentines or AntiValentines as much or as little as you want. Puppy love isn't bad. Life-sized teddy bears aren't bad. Cheesy, mushy romantic gestures aren't bad. Buy that card that says exactly what you wish you could say every day of the year to a loved one. If you've ever been in puppy love, you know it's a pretty fun space.

But it's not the *end* of the journey. In fact, it's barely the tip of the iceberg. It's at most the *beginning* of something... something way bigger, deeper, richer. If puppy love is the cheese, then real love is a full steak dinner.

These words are used so much they lose meaning, but Paul states how important these words are. So when Paul says, “Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love,” he’s not talking about romantic love. We miss that... be honest: how many times have you heard this scripture read at a wedding for the bride and groom? For the two of them to acknowledge and pledge their life to one another? For some reason, when we hear the word ‘love’, we jump straight to ‘romance’. Faith, hope and love? It’s about weddings.

Except it’s not.

[**Scripture Slide**] Turn to 1 Corinthians 13 with me. That’s right... we’re reading that whole cliché wedding CHAPTER today! Get your groans out now, because guess what? These verses aren’t about weddings or marriage or any of that. In fact, Paul - the guy who wrote this - was single.

This scripture though was written by Paul to the Corinthians in his letters back and forth to the churches that were asking for his help. During this time the Corinthian Church was deeply divided; lots of things going on, some mild and some severe. The people of the church were having issues of class (poor and wealthy), issues with morality and issues of power. The Corinthian people were not getting along or living well with each other.

The Corinthians were arguing and pointing fingers at each other; here’s what they do, here’s what we do. They were measuring their faithfulness or spirituality against each other. The rich took advantage of the poor. They believed they couldn’t worship with others that didn’t believe politically like they did. Their morality was forced on others. They were putting on the best show, trying to be the most impressive, look the most spiritual part. But they were not not living and loving each other as they should have. They were separating themselves based on status, money, power over others.

By the time we get to chapter 13, Paul has been chastising the church for their divisions and in-fighting. In chapter 12, he introduced his famous “church is a body” metaphor, and he turns now to talk to everyone who thinks they’re better than someone else - because they have more money, because they’re more spiritual, because they’re a better preacher or prayer or any other reason. Here’s what Paul says to that Church:

If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn’t love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God’s secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn’t love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn’t love others, I would have gained nothing.

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

Prophecy and speaking in unknown languages and special knowledge will become useless. But love will last forever!

...Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love. -
- 1 Corinthians 13:1-8, 13

For Paul it all comes down to—they are dealing with what is not the issue or what is important, it is fighting with each other and the most spiritual and ignoring others for the greater of themselves. Paul thought others were not focusing on the test of time. They were not focusing on what was eternal, what would last. You aren't focusing on faith, hope and love—the things that will last, your character, how you have been faithful, hopeful and loving and what you are leaving the earth with.

We look at these three words and they feel generic: faith, hope and love. But for Paul, these words have very specific meanings for a person following Jesus. Faith is commitment and trust. We measure it by our spiritual growth. Hope is a promise and looks like the future. Love is unconditional and can be measured and seen, cherished, shown, given back and exchanged.

Paul explained how important love is in a person's life. He said that even though someone has many gifts, without love they are somewhat useless. You can have marvelous gifts used to help people and bring joy to those who need it, but without love, your works will be useless. Like in the business world, results are the most important, and it doesn't matter if you are kind to others as long as you get the numbers. Paul says, Not so in the church. Wealth, success, fame, power - these will all pass away. What remains eternally is our character. Our faithfulness, our hope and our love.

These three words don't necessarily come naturally to us. Like we talked about last week, these are virtues. God will give them to us as we work at them. We roll our eyes when we hear this scripture at a wedding because we know that love is work and not just about "romance".

Have you seen any of those "30 days" challenges? There are so many; 30 days to lose weight, 30 days to make a habit, 30 days to reading the Bible, 30 days of loving your child or your spouse. The one that sticks out to me is 30 days loving your spouse and there is a book based on this (the Love Dare). You know why they're all 30-days? Because that's how long it takes to form a habit.

It might sound silly, but once you make these acts a habit they are habits that become a self-feeding cycle that doesn't stop. Paul is challenging the Corinthians to make these virtues into habits. And just like we saw last week, we're not trying to form these eternal habits alone. God is helping us all along the way. He is making this hope you have in changing true.

When we are not in this, but once they start to become habits they become self feeding, natural. Just like any new habit we try to start it feels unnatural: gym, healthy eating, reading scriptures, being positive, (Fruit of the Spirit) generous, being a peacemaker, being patient.

And the most important? According to Paul, we need to hang out on faith, hope and love-everything grows out of these three. They are the root: faith, hope and love.

You create your own pathways to get there. Teaching character is my main job as a teacher. It is not rocket science that after 20 years of loving teenagers is hard, but I have made decisions as I have gone down this path that have shaped me to love these kids easier everyday. It has become a habit to discipline them, teach them, guide them and it has been my faith, hope and love that have gotten me to where I am. I don't want to be the cheesy mom that I am, but I am that person. I love my students like they are my own, I am hard on them, I smother them but I know I have faith in them when they don't, I hope for their future and I love them as they come!

I have had to change things as I have walked down a path and had to stop and take the Y in the road. But in the end the road goes where God has led me and He is always faithful.

Let me give you an example, I do this thing at the beginning of the school year that every kid hates: what's your favorite color, what type of music do you like, who do you live with, what is your favorite food, a childhood memory, who was your favorite teacher and why? It seems that it is literally busy work as I check attendance, pick up forms, all of those paperwork items.

But it is half way through the school year and since I have built trust they come to me not for homework help or tutoring. They come to me with problems, needing advice or just an ear to listen. The foundation of a teacher's classroom is built on trust and the relationship you form daily.

Kids don't associate this trust they have in me with that stupid worksheet they had to do at the beginning of the year. But I have them fill out that worksheet as a way to begin

that relationship. It's a habit I have that paves the way for a deep relationship, one that exhibits faith, hope and love in them.

What does it look like? What forms when we are doing these things, these habits, these practices that will point us in the right direction or the wrong direction? Our generic or sentimental love can take over. Church is just a Sunday thing. It does not affect our work relationships, parenting, marriage, friendships. It is just something that we do. We are pessimistic about our future; the job or promotion we didn't get, the 2020 elections, relationships that sucked life out of us, a civil war happening, your teenage "love" feelings.

When we have not made a habit of faith, hope and love, these feelings of uncertainty and pessimism take over. But once they start to become habits they become self feeding, natural. Just like any new habit we try to start it feels unnatural: gym, checking on friends, being present in our conversations and time with others, healthy eating, reading scriptures, being positive, (Fruit of the Spirit) generous, hurrying home to spend time with those you care for, being a peacemaker, being patient, caring for our spouse or loved one, small things to make others smile, putting your phone down, walking in the sunshine, checking on your neighbor, giving your gifts to those in need.

But remember: habits take time to form. So pay attention to the little things. Love is the simple things! The everyday, the small acts and gestures. It doesn't have to be grand dramatic acts or The Notebook run in your arms kind of love. It is the same acts of kindness to all of those around you that matter. The smile to the mom having a hard time with her kiddos at the checkout aisle when they want candy, the sweet couple you see sharing a meal together, holding the door open as you walk into a building, helping the person stranded on the side of the road with a flat tire (that might be a big gesture but my husband always stops to help and that makes my heart swell with joy as I watch my husband help others and my son is witnessing the actions of kindness his father is given and he will do this as an adult and pass it on to his children) it is the helping a neighbor when they are sick with a meal or a coworker when they are running late to a meeting.

God is working with us, helping us to learn these virtues, to develop character that lasts for eternity. Small acts become habits that form eternal character. It is the small everyday love that shows Jesus' love for all. We can walk away from things, we can wake up each morning knowing we can take on the day with God's love leading us and covering us.

We can be a people of faith, hope and love. And the greatest is love.

Communion/Prayer of Examen:

[**Communion Slide**] We come to the communion table to receive not just wafers and grape juice, but a tangible symbol of God's love for us. This meal invites us to share a table with Jesus and his disciples - the same meal they shared the night before he was killed.

At that meal, Jesus faced down his coming crucifixion with great faith. He could have fled into the darkness, but he remained faithful to God and to us. He could have succumbed to despair. But despite the unimaginable hardship, he remained hopeful that God, not death, would have the final word. And he could have chosen to be selfish, to take care of himself, to ignore all the disciples who would soon abandon him. Instead, he chose the path of self-giving love, remaining faithful and hope-filled to the very end.

So we come to this table to receive Jesus' faith, hope and love. We receive the grace we need to make these virtues our own, to walk in the tradition of Jesus himself. You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive communion with us. If you're willing to receive faith, hope and love from Jesus, then you're welcome to join us.

Before we come to the table, I'm going to lead us in a prayer of examen. I'm going to ask you some questions and give you space to pray over your answers with God. Then I'll pray for all of us together, and as you're ready, you're welcome to receive communion with us.

Here's the first question:

1. **How has God shown me faithfulness in the last week?**
2. **What does it look like for me to hope this week?**
3. **How can I demonstrate self-giving love this week?**

Let's pray together:

God,

You have gathered us this morning that we might know what it means to be part of your eternal family. You are the one who is always faithful, no matter how faithful we are. Teach us to be faithful as you are faithful.

You are the one who always believes the best in us, who never gives up hope, who works relentlessly for the good future you are bringing to be. Teach us to be a people of hope, to resist the despair of our age.

You are the one who is always loving, who gives yourself to us, up to and including your own life. Teach us to be a people of love, who show the world what true self-giving love looks like.

We come to your table today as a people hungry and thirsty for your virtues. As we receive these wafers and juice, may they be a spiritual food for us. Give us the grace we need to be your people. We offer these prayers and approach your table today in the name of your son, Jesus.

Assignment:

Faith, Hope and Love and the greatest of these is love. Going back to JR's assignment from a few weeks ago.