

**In Praise of the Tried and True
Psalm 146 (King James Version)
John 3:1-17 (King James Version)
Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Seventeenth Sunday in Pentecost
Woodbury UMC
October 2, 2022**

My intention for today is that at least some of you are thinking:

“I love hearing the King James scriptures!”

“I love this music!”

“I love having the curtains down so we can see the windows!” (*laughter*)

In a little while, you will be invited to come forward to the communion rail. My hope is that for some of you, this will be a particularly meaningful experience, as we haven't come forward to kneel at the railing in some time. The physical act of approaching the communion table, of assuming a physical position of supplication, it can be terrifically moving and emotional. At least it usually is for me. The last few years have made the point that we can take communion in all manner of ways, but there is still power in the traditional.

We do these things because they are meaningful. Not even really meaning that we have assigned to them. All of these things are old enough that they can be called traditional, and traditional worship elements are longstanding ways that we connect ourselves to God. Most of these are things we haven't done here in a little while. That is reason enough to do them, but I wanted to talk a little more about why we are doing them now.

Today is World Communion Sunday. Communion is a sacrament, one of the core things we do that distinguishes us as Christian believers. We do lots of other things, we connect to God in many other ways — but communion remains central. This got me thinking about what we do, in worship, as a congregation, in the

community. There are all manner of ways we can worship, lots of things we do in order to connect with people. The gospel message does not change — but the way that we share it, there are all kinds of things we do. I love that — because by doing new and different things, we reach more people. By exploring and trying new ways to worship, we help people make a connection with Jesus. I greatly enjoy finding as many new and different ways to worship as we can, because in doing so, each new modality creates a possibility of reaching someone else, creating an opportunity to make disciples of Jesus, a new opportunity to transform the world.

All of that is good, and we will continue to experiment with how we do worship. I hope we can do lots of things that really push the envelope. But today for me is a reminder that in embracing the new, we should take care not to disregard the traditional. Keep in mind: The reason for doing something we've never done before is so that we may create an opportunity to bring a person deeper into connection with Christ. But the reason we have done things the way we have for such a long time is that these traditional elements of worship, these traditional aspects of our faith — they connect many people with Christ in a way that more modern methods never will.

Today I want to recognize and celebrate our tradition.

Traditions connect us to other believers, around the world and going back hundreds or thousands of years. The windows of this building look about how I'd think they looked when this building was new. By using them in the architectural style they were meant to have — for some of you, this will bring you right back to what you felt when you decided that this was the congregation for you.

We began this time of worship with a beautiful anthem on handbells, one of the stalwart Methodist hymns, but in a new arrangement that may help you to hear it differently, or to connect with you in a fresh way. The traditional and the modern, making our worship experience more meaningful in their interplay. That

is what we are trying to accomplish, to offer something meaningful to a broad range of people as we are able.

Are any of you from a tradition that would recite the Apostle's Creed or the Nicene Creed during weekly worship? Today, we've used the Apostles Creed in response to the proclamation of God's word in the reading of the scriptures. Methodists are not creedal, so we don't usually do that. In celebrating the traditional, it is a reminder that we gathered here come from many traditions, and that we Methodists are part of a tradition that stretches back thousands of years, and all because something didn't originate with us in no way negates the value it may have for some of us. Reciting the Apostles Creed brings a strong emotional memory of my growing up in a Presbyterian congregation. That might not mean anything to you — but if you grew up in a Roman Catholic context, you may have been given a rosary by someone you love, and the rosary may stir similar emotions in you. As may hearing the mass celebrated in Latin. You can't understand what they are saying, but you sure know how it makes you feel to be in the presence of those ancient, holy words in that space.

God is beyond our ability to fully comprehend, but we do keep trying. I celebrate that we do so using a broad range of metaphor and language. God as Mother, God as Love, God as Relationship, God as a woman searching after a lost coin, God as Mother Hen. But the one most people recognize is God as Father. We keep coming back to that one because it has meaning that some people don't feel in those other formulations. I will keep using those other formulations, because using gendered language for a God that is beyond gender can be challenging. If for you that is not the case, then it is for you that today we praise God, our Almighty Father.

I love to explore the nooks and crannies of the Bible, because they offer wisdom and perspective that bring color and light to the rest of our Biblical understanding — but for that to work, you need a core. Verses like John 3:16 are

foundational for many people. When you hear the rest of John 3 around those words you get a sense of the directness of the truth of the Gospel, the directness which is speaking to you directly. You feel it in a way that you don't always feel some of these other things. On this World Communion Sunday, it's offered as a recognition of the vastness of God's love yet that has been a personal salvation for people who trust the truth of the gospel for millennia. If you have ever tried to memorize any scripture, John 3:16 was probably one of them. I bet some of you felt some excitement stirring as you recognized the reading and we got closer and closer to those powerful words. I chose Psalm 146 for similar reasons. It is a song of praise that packs a great theological wallop into just ten verses. The Bible is foundational for us, and some chapters and verses take on the character of old friends to those who have made a priority of getting to know the scriptures.

There are some Christians who question the validity of the Bible if it isn't presented in the King James Version. I rarely use the King James Version, because it is not a scholarly translation. Given the sorts of issues we contend with in the modern church—think of any social issue you want, we quibble over words and meanings of words and shades of words and translations of words. With all that, I prefer a translation that is very careful about the meaning of each word. But for some people, you can't improve upon the poetry of the KJV, which is less about each individual word, and more about the sense and meaning of how it all flows together, making meaning as a unit. Interestingly, it uses language from centuries ago, so what was contemporary then is now a part of our traditional reading.

That's one of the challenges of the traditional — who's tradition are we talking about? One of our hymns today is from African American tradition. That isn't my genetic ancestry, but it is part of my spiritual DNA , and that counts for something.

One of the places where I am most traditional is that I love using the books in the pews.

I prefer singing out of a hymnal where I can read the music rather than just being offered the words without the music. As a child, I learned how to sing harmonies in the church by using the hymnal. After a while I got to recognize certain composers, saw which of these hymns shared common melodies. Started to consider: if a given hymn was written in the middle of a war, what else is going on here? and so on.

I love reading the scriptures out of my Bible. Even with a gifted liturgist, I have better comprehension when I follow along, seeing what came before and after the lectionary section. That goes double when the lectionary has snipped out something. (What are they trying to hide from me? What's really going on?) It's even better when you bring your own Bible. I encourage you to try it, and to try making little notes in it. It took me decades to get used to making notes in my Bible, because I love books, and I don't want to deface a holy book. What I have learned, and what I offer you, is that rather than defacing it, you're engaging in it. If it's your Bible you're engaging with more personally and more deeply, and if one of the reasons you're here in worship is to better understand God? Boy, what can be better than that!

One thing I am still getting to know is the traditional as it pertains to this specific congregation, this specific worshipping community. We have historic artifacts, sure, but we also have a living tradition that is best expressed in how each of you describe how this congregation has affected your life, your faith, your family.

I see no contradiction in this. We have some traditions that we share with all Christian believers. We have other beliefs we share with all Protestants, a smaller group, and still other beliefs we share with Methodists. And finally, there are still some traditions that you only really get if you are a member of this congregation.

We celebrate World Communion Sunday today, with worldwide Christendom. The idea came from a Pittsburgh area Presbyterian minister in 1930,

and, well, nothing much came of it. Until the Second World War, that is — and with that came an increased understanding of one's own mortality. THAT stuck, and the spirit of this day caught hold. This day symbolized the effort of bringing the world together, in a spiritual sense. This celebration was adopted in the U.S. in the period during World War II.

Have any of you had an increased sense of your own mortality lately? And so this observance continues to take on new shades of meaning. Of solidarity with other human beings going through what we are going through. It is a reminder that we belong to Christ, and that reminder can give a renewed courage that simply isn't available any other way, a courage that can be necessary to get you through all the other things going on.

At some point I'm going to want to talk a little bit more about the pandemic we're currently in. As Covid fades, a pandemic of loneliness is rearing its head in a big way. Worship reminds us we are not alone. Communion reminds us we are never alone. That our Savior walks alongside of us, always. I would argue that tradition serves a similar purpose, reminding us of the great cloud of Christian believers that have found solace in these words, these melodies, this very building. As we prepare to approach the Lord's Table, we physically partake of a core sacrament, engaging all of our senses.

May the risen Christ approach us in the sacraments, and may He find our actions done and offered in his name to be pleasing.

Amen.