

## **“Heirlooms and Hand-Me-Downs” Psalm 106:1-12**

Back in the 1970s when I was a kid, I looked forward to Sunday nights. Why? Because that’s when a TV show called “Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom” aired. Some of you may be too young to remember that one, so let me fill you in on what kind of show it was. Long before the late Steve Erwin gave us “The Crocodile Hunter ...” long before Bear Grylls had “Man vs. Wild,” or Jeff Corwin’s “Quest,” or Jack Hannah’s “Into the Wild” there was Marlin Perkins. He was a zoologist who was a bit of an adventurer, so he was offered a television show called “Zoo Parade” back in the early 60s. Now supposedly, his specialty was reptiles, but he kept getting bit by rattlesnakes and cotton mouths, which I guess if it happens enough, starts to take a toll on one’s health. So in 1963, he was offered another television show called “Wild Kingdom” and it was sponsored by Mutual of Omaha Insurance Company, thus “Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom.” This show gave Marlin the chance to travel the globe to educate his audience about animals in the wild. The show ran from 1963 to 1985, a year before his death at age 81. And he dealt with some pretty dangerous animals too. Lions, tigers, bears, alligators, rhinoceros, hippos, leopards ... mostly animals that can do serious damage to you if you weren’t careful. Not to be outdone by his contemporary Jacques Cousteau, he’d even throw in an occasional shark just for the fun of it. Does any of this ring a bell? Can any of you remember this show? Good. I’m glad I wasn’t the only fan.

Anyway, I think Marlin learned his lesson from his experience with the snakes, because instead of going out in the field on his own, he had an assistant named ... Jim Fowler. Jim looked like a super-hero ... square jaw, broad shoulders, perfect teeth and he always wore these awesome hats that gave him this sort of “Alan Quartermain” look. Jim did all the dirty work. He drove the Land-Rover over rough terrain. He wielded the tranquilizer gun when it was time to tag the animals. He wrestled the alligators and stared down the water buffalo who seemed eager to gore the first human who stepped on their territory. Marlin wisely stood at a safe distance with a pair of binoculars talking in his high-pitched

monotone about the social intricacies of gorillas while Jim was out there getting the stuffing beat out of him by the dominate primate in the troop who was only a tad smaller than King Kong.

I *loved* that show. Maybe not so much for the education about animals, but just to see what kind of a beating Jim was going to take that week. And he just kept coming back for more too ... long after any other reasonable human would have told Marlin to go ... fly a kite he held on. But the best thing about “Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom?” Snack time. You heard me right ... *snack time*. And my favorite snack to have while watching Wild Kingdom ... and *only* while watching Wild Kingdom, was a bowl of raisins with milk. And I’m not talking a bowl of raisins with a glass of milk, I’m talking about a bowl of raisins with milk poured over them like cereal ... eaten with a spoon and everything. It was like raisin bran without the bran. You know how kids pick the raisins out of raisin bran? I picked them out and ate them. I’d leave the bran flakes, but give me those raisins. Raisins and milk along with Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom happened *every* Sunday night, which made it a ... tradition.

Now, there might be a misperception about what I think about traditions. Some people, based on things that I may have said or done, might conclude “Oh, Jesse doesn’t like traditions.” Not true. Traditions are helpful to give meaning to different things we do. This week, a lot of people are going to be observing American Thanksgiving. I make that distinction because I met a Canadian this week who observed the Canadian Thanksgiving last month and has apparently had enough for the year. Our Thanksgiving celebrations seem to be filled with all sorts of traditions. What are some of your favorites? [Use the typewriters to write down “what does tradition mean to me?” or “What’s my favorite tradition?”]

We observe these traditions because they bring us pleasure or joy. Or maybe they help us remember something or someone. Some traditions are contained in a particular family and are observed only for a finite

period of time. It would be sort of weird, let's say, if a family had a tradition of the kids busting into mom and dad's room on Christmas morning and bouncing on the bed until they got up. If your 40 year old adult children are still doing that ... y'know, who am I to judge, but some traditions have a shelf life, right? When traditions lose their meaning, or when we do them out of habit just because that's what we've always done ... that's when they become problematic. They cease to inspire joy. They become a chore to prepare for.

Traditions, at their best, are handed down from generation to generation in the same way that heirlooms are handed down. We pass them on down to our kids and they pass them on to theirs and so on. Traditions might reflect a particular value or moral that is passed through the generations so that when your kids ask you, "Why do we do this?" the answer might be, "Because we are Kearnses, that's why." Because we, as a family, value this enough to pass it down to you as it was passed down by our mothers and fathers.

So what do I think about traditions in the church? Why does it seem like I get snarky sometimes when I talk about how the church shouldn't get mired in tradition? What I'm talking about is not getting weighed down by traditions that become a stumbling block to doing effective and transformative ministry. What I'm talking about is not hanging on to things for no other reason than, "Well because we've always done it that way before." That's when I roll my eyes. Traditions that we can articulate and explain in depth can serve to reflect our values and help us look to the future while honoring the past. They're like spiritual heirlooms.

Part of the church's mission is to pass these kinds of traditions on. In Christ's church, we pass on the gospel or "good news." What is the good news? God is reconciling the world. The reign of God is at hand. Love wins. No matter what, God seeks after us ... *relentlessly*. No matter what, God's love is reliable and steadfast. No matter what, we have been given the opportunity to receive grace and kindness ... not

because we've done anything to deserve it, but because of who ... God ... is. *These* are the church's "spiritual heirlooms." And they were meant to be handed down from generation to generation.

There's nowhere where this is more apparent than when we come together at the Lord's Table. Some people call it "The Lord's Supper." Some people call it, "Communion." Today I'm leaning on the term, "The Eucharist." The word "Eucharist" means to give thanks. It's a tradition that's observed in many churches, and in the case of our church, one that's observed weekly, because the central message of this ritual is one worth remembering every chance we gather together as a community.

In 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 11:23 the Apostle Paul writes-- "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you." These are the first words in a passage that we call "The Words of Institution ..." the words spoken right before we share the Lord's Supper together. There are several places in scripture where we see examples of the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist, but this is the one in which Paul identifies the table as a tradition that illustrates the ministry of the church that is handed down from generation to generation. We are a people of the open table. In the same way we observe traditions around the Thanksgiving table, the tradition of the Lord's Supper is a reminder that God welcomes us all into fellowship with Christ.