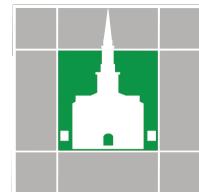


Back-Sliding

Scripture text: Galatians 1:13-17; 2:11-21

The Rev. Matthew McCaffrey

Center Church on the Green, May 9, 2021



I need to phrase this carefully: I am a child of the 1960s. Not a teenager or a young adult, but a child during that decade of ferment. And as a child of the 1960s, my early years coincided with the first three generations of human spaceflight. You could say that I am a space native—people in my consciousness have always been launched from rocket pads and lived in the weightless and airless regions outside of our own planet's atmosphere.

As a space native, I learned that there is a certain economic calculation attached to space flight, especially if you want to escape gravity and travel great distances. Sending a single large vehicle into space and dragging along empty fuel tanks and useless rocket motors is a losing proposition. So, all the rockets I saw as a



child were built in modules called “stages.” The first stage lifted the rocket off the Earth’s surface, and was jettisoned when its fuel was exhausted. Similarly with the second and third stages, and if they were out of the Earth’s atmosphere when they were jettisoned they would burn up—who cares? All the equipment brought into space for, say, a lunar mission, would be shed once it was used up. The Saturn V (FIVE) rocket that was 363 feet tall¹ when it lifted off would come back as a capsule just under 11 feet tall.²

Space economics calls for that: you throw away what you don’t need any more. We saw just how expensive it is to try to reuse spaceships with the Space Shuttle program, which was as dazzling as it was both dangerous and expensive.

So, space native that I am, I was sure I was witnessing folly the first time I watched a test flight by an Internet startup company called SpaceX. They claimed they were going to do something different. Instead of bolting parachutes onto their booster rockets and trying to salvage them from the ocean, SpaceX said they

¹ “Rocket Park: Saturn V”, 16 Sept 2011, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, https://www.nasa.gov/centers/johnson/rocketpark/saturn_v.html; retrieved from the Web May 8, 2021.

² “CSM06 Command Module Overview pp. 39-52,” National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 1 Nov 2016; from “Apollo command and service module” on Wikipedia; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apollo_command_and_service_module#Command_module_\(CM\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apollo_command_and_service_module#Command_module_(CM)); retrieved from the Web May 8, 2021.

planned to fly their boosters to a landing pad floating in the ocean and land them upright.

It couldn't possibly work, I thought. It goes against every traditional principle of rocketry. Wernher von Braun would be spinning in his grave.

And yet, somehow, that booster found its way to the landing pad bobbing in the middle of the Atlantic ocean. Somehow, it turned itself upright. Somehow, it landed.

And somehow, the whole idea of space flight incorporated a new idea into its traditional canon of space economics. It doesn't work every time, but when it works, it is spectacular.



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The SpaceX method of launching and landing a booster rocket is innovative. The hardest part of getting the rocket off the ground was persevering in the face of space tradition. Innovation's greatest foe is "the way we've always done it."

It is heady and energizing to try out new things. Imagine how excited the first person to think of a two-story house must have been. “Look! My house is on the same size lot as everyone else’s. But now I have twice the space.” That person must have thought they’d hit the living space jackpot.



But they also had to contend with the neighbors. “What is that awful-looking thing on top of your house? It’s blocking the sun, it’s soaking up all the fresh air. Birds are going to run into it and die! None of us have ever, ever built a monstrous-looking house like that. And we’re not going to tolerate that...that thing. Not in our backyard!”



Those neighbors represent tradition. And their objections carry a lot of weight. They know how to build houses. They know what an authentic house looks like. And, traditional values dictate that free-thinkers don’t have a place in their traditional neighborhood,

and that little bit extra on top of the house has to go because it doesn't fit in with their traditional neighborhood values.

Of course, if we happen to have built the house with the extra on top, we might feel defensive about being called out like that. We might even feel like we should just take off the extra on top and be done with it. All that extra space, that breathing room, that opportunity to explore what can be done with our innovative space...maybe it's not the right time, or maybe someone else will get to do it some day. Maybe it's just easier to conform.

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I can't think of anyone more qualified or more eloquent on this topic than that great figure of our ancestral church, Paul. Many have faced the pressure of tradition that suppresses the innovative work of the Holy Spirit over the centuries. And many have been inspired by Paul's writing on the subject.

It's easy to see why Paul is so passionate in today's selections from Galatians. Our translation captures more than passion: he is furious, outraged, just plain angry with how Peter behaved among these people that Paul had gathered with a promise of Good News.

Peter, the great Apostle, the Rock of the church, the one who had been singled out by Jesus himself as foremost among his followers—Peter had come to Antioch and reveled in the

community's life. They'd gone out to dinner and enjoyed the local cuisine, which assuredly was not kosher. Peter had socialized with non-circumcised believers as though they were his religious equals.

But then Peter's neighbors showed up. They were called "the Judaizers," and their understanding of Jesus was that he was the Messiah promised by Yahweh as a fulfillment of the Covenant. They did not see Jesus' arrival as a new thing, but as God's gracious fulfillment of that promise, which of course it was.

Their call to new believers was to take on the rituals and practices of Judaism, including dietary practices and circumcision for the men.

And, there's Peter—caught with a piece of good Antiochan pork chop in his mouth, just about to tell a convert there was no need to worry about circumcision. When the traditionalists came calling, the weight of their argument causes Peter to spit out his food and start acting like he'd never heard the message of grace that he had embraced just five minutes before.

Paul's response comes from his own heart and his own experience. Paul knows what it is like to be bound by tradition. And Paul is not having it.

Tradition in itself is not a bad thing. But if Paul's life is measured by keeping the rules of tradition, then he is lost. He's lost

because the best people who ever lived couldn't keep up with all the rules of tradition. It doesn't work, Paul says. It does not in itself bring life and light into the world, Paul says. It does not honor the gift of freedom in Christ that God has offered him.

Paul says that tradition needs to be mediated by the new discoveries rather than falling back on old rules. He says, build that second story on our house, and don't snip it off when the neighbors complain. He says, land that booster rocket, and don't worry about what rules it breaks.

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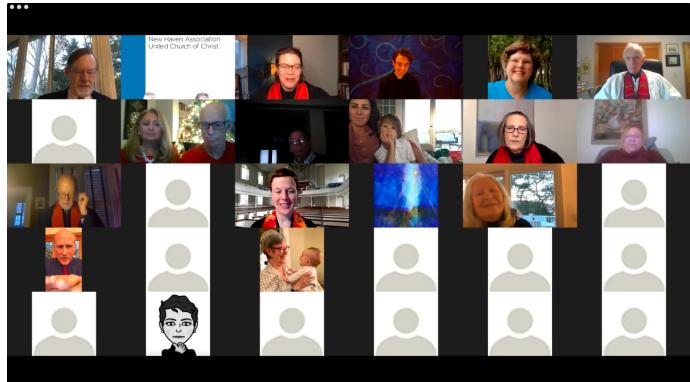
I say all this today
because our online
community will soon face
a crossroads. As we start
to face the reality that
society is reopening and it may soon be safe to gather in person
there are themes that have been emerging in my conversations
with you.



One is that we have innovated mightily in this past year. There is no question that our online worship is living in a second story that we have built together. We have found ways to proclaim good news, to preach, to pray, and to make amazing music that is not bound by your past.

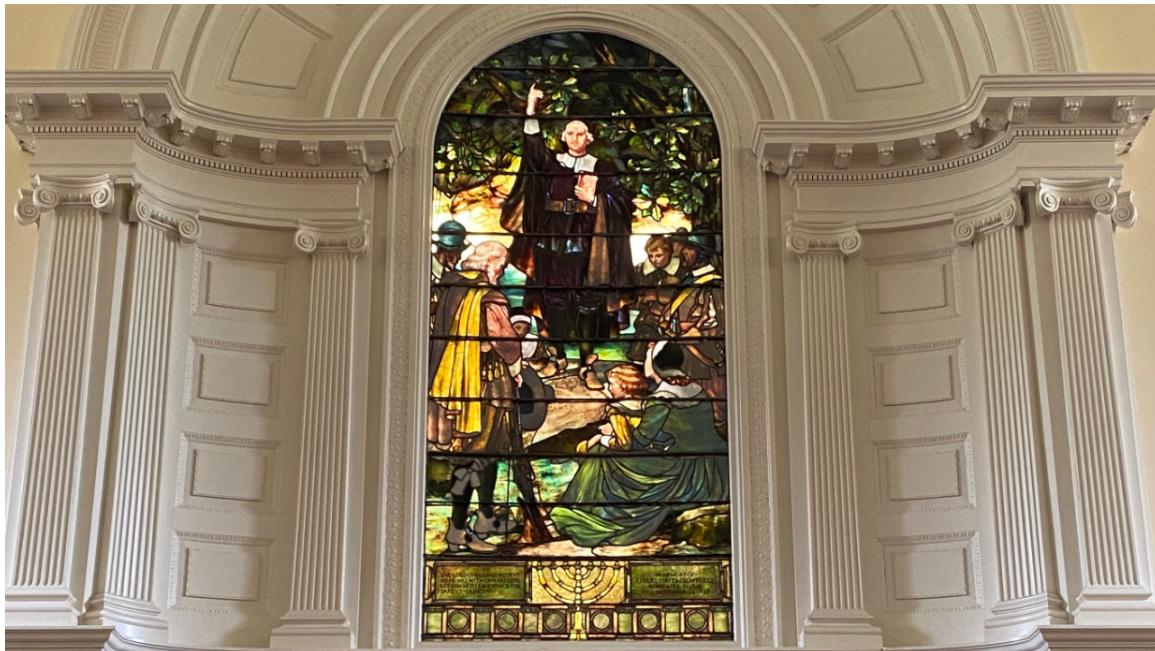


The other is that those who have gathered in live worship have gotten to know each other much better online than they ever thought was possible in the large and isolated surroundings of a downtown meetinghouse. You have found conversation and shared prayer to be an intimate experience in this space. I have been energized by the opportunity to hear your reactions and responses to these meditations. We've landed that booster in a spectacular and successful way.



There is no question that the Center Church fellowship will return to a practice of meeting face to face. The First Church of Christ in New Haven has too much invested in its historical and traditional meetinghouse simply to abandon it.

But the question Paul would ask, the question I ask, is how will this fellowship approach returning to face to face gatherings? Will you go back to sitting in isolated corners of a huge sanctuary? Will



you become an audience for what is going on up front, and then depart untouched by what has happened? Will you greet new people as long as they are willing to conform to 400 years of tradition?

Or will you adopt what we have learned in the past year in this space? Will you adapt to the demonstrated need to extend this

fellowship beyond the four walls of a particular building? Will you spit the pork chop of technology out of your mouth once you see John Davenport's ancient visage preaching to the natives once more?

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Paul affirms that God offers us a living and personal relationship through grace. Living by faith in Christ we can engage in a “both/and” practice of our worship life. We can bring together the heart of tradition, and the heart of innovation, into this complicated 21st Century in which we abide. There are people who thirst for the good news we can offer, if we only choose to bring it to them.

The future of this gathered congregation depends upon our choice.

In the name of the Christ who brings peace and redemption to us. Alleluia! Amen.³

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