

In their book, The 1 Thing, Thom and Joani Schultz tell the story of a worship committee that wanted to make their church more inviting to guests. To do this they began by looking for things that might be a hindrance to newcomers. The first thing they noticed was that current members seemed to arrive just before the service began and rushed out right afterward. They also noticed that while there was a coffee pot downstairs in the fellowship hall every Sunday, visitors didn't know about it. To change this, the committee moved the coffee pot up to the lobby outside the sanctuary. Then they invited members to linger after worship for coffee before going home. The plan worked. People began to hang around after worship, and the lobby became a friendly place not only for guests, but also for members. But not all the members were happy with the change.

A group of members whom Thom and Joani label the 'museum curators' declared that a silver coffee pot clashed with their white colonial style lobby. The 'museum curators' stated that such laughing and chatting right outside the sanctuary was sacrilegious. And the 'museum curators' said this kind of activity was not in harmony with the ways they had done church in the past. Then came the final straw. One of the 'museum curators' saw someone go into the sanctuary with a cup of coffee. The next day, they demanded an emergency leadership meeting be held. And at that meeting, the leadership team voted to move the coffee pot back downstairs.

Traditions are important. Without them we don't know how we got to where we are today. We don't know whether today is better than yesterday. And we don't know if tomorrow is something to anticipate or dread. But when traditions become the main thing a church is about, its ability to invite people to enter into - and deepen in - a relationship with God is diminished. This is not new however. Jesus ran into this issue a lot. Time after time, Jesus would be inviting people to enter into relationship with Him when the 'the museum curators' would rush in to demand that He reconcile what He was saying with their traditions. They would demand to know why He didn't do things their tradition required. And they would demand answers as to why He didn't follow a thousand other religious practices their tradition mandated.

Matthew, for instance, tells of time when the Sadducees asked Jesus a question about what would happen in heaven to a woman who survived several husbands. But Jesus understood that their question had nothing to do with the widow and whose wife she would be. Their intent was to trick him into saying something they could claim violated their traditions. So in response, He explained that God is more interested in people entering into - and deepening - a relationship with Him than He cares about having people follow a list of traditions.

We see why Jesus would have tried to teach them that in the reading from Isaiah. Isaiah wrote to the Jewish people of his time, saying "*this is what the Lord says . . . forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.*" This is because Isaiah wanted the Israelites to understand that it did not matter if God delivered their ancestors from Egypt in days gone by if they were not walking with God in the present moment.

We see the danger Isaiah was warning them about in Hazel and Harvey. For fifty years, Hazel and Harvey recited the communion liturgy from page 5 of their hymnal on the first Sunday of each

month. They even nicknamed it “The Page 5 Liturgy.” Each time a new pastor came, they threatened to leave if “The Page 5 Liturgy” wasn’t used. On his first communion Sunday, their newest pastor printed “The Page 5 liturgy” in the bulletin. Hazel and Harvey refused to take communion. To them, that was too grievous a violation of tradition to be forgiven. So they left the church.

But before we are too hard on Hazel and Harvey, or point our finger at the Sadducees, it might be helpful to look in the mirror. We humans crave stability. We want to order our world in a way that makes sense to us. And when it comes to our involvement in church, this reality remains just as true. That is because people often look at their church as a sort of refuge from the tribulations of life. And when they look at the church that way, they want their church to be stable and unchanging so they can re-calibrate their bearings each Sunday.

Typically that is not a problem. But it can become a problem when the desire that nothing change replaces the desire to seek - and deepen - relationship with God. We see this in a book by Erwin McManus titled An Unstoppable Force. In that book, McManus writes that “*when the church becomes our shelter from a changing world, we fail to make God our hiding place.*” But then he goes on to say “*but when the church becomes a movement . . . she becomes a place of transformation.*” But to be a movement, and not museum, a church needs to pay attention to what Jesus said is “*the 1 thing.*”

This is because churches come into being by the actions of particular people, in a particular place, at a particular time. What was happening in the lives of those people at the time, and in the community around the church at the time, had an effect on the personality that church developed. As time moved on, events in the lives of the church’s members, and in the community around the church, influenced how the personality of that church matured. As a result, every church ends up with its own unique culture and particular way of doing things.

It is therefore important that as new members join a church they are made aware of its history, and how that history influences its mission. When that doesn’t happen, new members may be unsure why things are done a certain way. They may not feel like they belong. And they may battle long term members who tell them “*we don’t do things that way.*” By contrast, when new members are made away of the history of the church, they understand their new spiritual home. They are able to help move ministries along in the same direction they had been heading. And they are accepted by long term members as newer advocates of the “*way we’ve always done it,*” even when the ways new members propose involve new methods and new procedures.

Unfortunately, churches (because they are made up of humans) are creatures of habit. And sometimes those habits can take on a life of their own, becoming - in effect - unchangeable traditions involving not just what is done, but also how things are done. To visualize this, think about how a person arranges their home. Once they configure their kitchen cabinets or their garage a certain way, they tend not to redo that process. And they resent it when someone (even their spouse) undoes their work without consulting them. When it comes to the mission and ministries of the church, the

problems this can create are eternal however. This is because the church is meant by God to be the entity through which people are helped to seek the “*one thing*.”

But since churches are just as much creatures of habit as the people on their membership list, they develop certain ways of doing things. Those ways of doing things develop into habits. And those habits become traditions that can get labeled as the only way to do things. And when that happens, traditions can get in the way of being about the one thing of enabling people to enter into - and deepen - a relationship with God, just like with Hazel, and Harvey, and the Sadducees.

Fortunately, the people who preceded us in what is now known as Christ UMC dealt positively with that reality. They didn’t treat what God had done in the past as something to memorialize in unchangeable traditions. They didn’t take the memories of what God had done once upon a time, and make them into museum exhibits. And they didn’t forget that while they had traditional ways of “doing church,” the most important action they could take was to be about “the 1 thing” of relationship with God - even if their traditions had to change for that to happen.

As a result, some of those who preceded us as members of what is now Christ UMC chose to close down their meeting house in Philadelphia where they had traditionally worshiped to allow the 1 thing to continue out here in this new place. Some of those who preceded us as members of what it now Christ UMC sold the meeting house in Tullytown where they had traditionally worshiped to be about the 1 thing in this new place. And those two groups who preceded us as members of what is now Christ UMC not only came together to be about the 1 thing, but added a building addition so even more people could come to this place to be about the 1 thing.

Now it’s our turn. We must have the courage to believe that God does not live in the traditions of the past, but in our relationship with Him in this present moment, and then act on that belief. We must have the courage to believe that God doesn’t want the past to control us, telling us (according to Isaiah) “*I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland,*” and then act on that belief. And we must have the courage to believe that God wants us to enter into - and deepen - a relationship with Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength each and every new day, and not settle for the fact that we may have done so in days gone by.

We see why this is important in the story of Stephen and his church. Stephen heard Thom and Joani Schultz speak about “the 1 thing” Jesus said is necessary. He heard them explain how every church needs to be about that 1 thing by helping people enter into - and deepen - a relationship with Jesus. And heard them lay out how easy it is for a church to become a museum (dedicated to remembering what God did in the past) rather than be about the 1 thing. What struck Stephen the most, however, was when they said that visitors to a church can pick up clues as to what a church is about as soon as they walk in the door by merely looking around.

When Stephen heard that statement, he had an “*Aha!*” moment. “*My church is a museum!*” he said to himself. And he realized that because he remembered that in hallway that serves as the main

entrance into their building there was a series of pictures on the wall. But those pictures did not proclaim the gospel message. They did not invite people into relationship with God. Nor did they speak about Christian life, Christian discipleship, or the “*1 thing*” God wants the church to be about. The pictures were merely portraits of their former pastors: a wall of pictures of people who had long since passed away, but were now part of the museum collection.

As we think about such things, and what it means for us and our church, we need to realize that while tradition can be useful when it becomes the primary thing, the church begins to die. This is because when tradition is the main thing, a church’s members are transformed from ambassadors for Christ and witnesses of His love to museum curators. And when members become museum curators, they cling less to Jesus (and a deepening relationship with Him) and more to artifacts of a bygone era - like certain kinds of music, particular kinds of liturgy, and what instruments can be used to lead a worship service. And when that negative transformation has fully taken root, something as silly as a coffee pot can get in the way of the “*one thing that is necessary.*”

Fortunately, it does not have to be that way. We can honor the past, and even have traditions, as long as we make sure they serve the purpose of us being about the 1 thing rather than prevent it from happening. We can do things in ways we’ve often done them, but we willing to try new ways when God asks us to do so, or situations require us to change. And we can do such things knowing that the God whom we seek to be in relationship with is with us every step of the way.