

## Why Do Traditions Matter?

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On the first morning of my first visit with my future husband's family, I lifted the fork for my initial taste of breakfast cake.

"Wait." Johnny stopped me. "This is the way we eat it." He dunked his chunk of cake into a cup filled with milk. Then he raised it to his mouth and, with white drops rolling down his wrist, bit off a big soggy corner. He rolled his eyes to the ceiling and groaned, "Mmm, mmm! They don't serve us this in the college dining hall, Ma Mohn." His five-foot-tall grandmother, Erma Mohn, just smiled.

She smiled again when I asked her later for the recipe. "Recipe? You can watch and write down what I do." So I watched and wrote: "Four handfuls of flour, a walnut-sized lump of butter..." She told me that she learned breakfast cake from her mother, Geneva Stoner, and that she had learned it from her mother, Martha Loos—an heirloom recipe. Years later, when Ma Mohn died, I packed a frozen breakfast cake into my suitcase to take to the other grandchildren gathered for her funeral.

Our children have always expected breakfast cake on birthday and holiday mornings. As young adults, they ask for it when they're home for a visit. After Ma Mohn's death, I thought of myself as the chief guardian of this family keepsake, until we visited Benjamin and Melissa, our son and his bride, and she served us breakfast cake. So now this heirloom belongs also to my children, who are at least the sixth generation enjoying it.

Traditions are a lot like heirlooms. Both probably have come to us through our families. Some you love; you can't imagine life without them. Some you're stuck with; you don't know what to do with them.

What are the traditions we're leaving our children, the next generation? Which traditions deserve to be stuck away in the attic? Into which traditions do we love to draw other people?

### God—Our Father and Our Inheritance

Traditions strengthen our sense of history and belonging. As Christians, our history is God's story of drawing us into his family. "I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me," says the Lord Almighty" (2 Corinthians 6:18).

It is as God's children that we find our sense of belonging. "You have received the spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ" (Romans 8:15-17).

We who are trusting Christ are the heirs of our Father, God. But what is the inheritance that we want from our Father? In this passage, Paul pictures us calling to him, "Abba! Father!" We are like children at the end of a long day. The only thing we want is our abba, our daddy. The yearning of our hearts is for him. And that is the great treasure we inherit from our heavenly Father—himself.

As David wrote in Psalm 37:4, "Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart." The inheritance we will receive from God is what we delight in most gladly and desire most deeply, the Lord himself.

With any other father, we would not receive our inheritance until he died. But God is eternal; he never dies. He is the Father who never leaves us nor forsakes us (Hebrews 13:5). He gives us himself.

We might wonder what is left to inherit if we have already been adopted into his family and he's already our Father. What more is there to look forward to? The apostle John answers: "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are...Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:1-2).

He is our Father now, and we are his children now. Yet we are still waiting for something—to see him as he is, to be like him as we long to be, and to have the passion of God himself to enjoy him. That is our complete inheritance—the full enjoyment of God himself.

### Why Do Traditions Matter?

In early December, when our first son, Karsten, was just over a year old, I thought about our meager Christmas traditions. I tried to see them through the eyes of a curious toddler. I imagined the conversations he and I might have during the month:

"Huzz-at?"

"Candles."

Then I mentally supplied the question he wouldn't even know yet to ask:

"Why candles?"

"Why?" I realized that was a question I was going to have to answer from now on, not just for Christmas traditions that particular year, but for all years and everyday. At that moment I knew that "just because" was no answer. Nor was "because that's the way Grandmother or Granddaddy do it" or "because it's pretty" or "because it's convenient" or "because that's what everybody does."

In the book of Exodus, Moses displays his understanding of the nature of children and the responsibility of parents: "And when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' you shall say, 'It is the sacrifice of the LORD's Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt'" (12:26-27).

Moses assumes children will ask why. And he instructs parents to give an answer that speaks of reality. This instruction is all in the context of laying out for children ceremonies that will portray the answer. He is giving them the answer, both spoken and displayed. And the answer is God—God saved us, and we honor him, worship him, thank him. We and our children need this kind of yearly repetition to impress us with the weight of what God has done.

Traditions are important for another reason. We've already seen one huge difference between the inheritance we receive from God and the one we receive from our physical families: God is both our Father and our present and future inheritance, our heirloom.

### **Only God Can Bequeath God**

There's another big difference between this inheritance and any other that we might receive: You can't bequeath God to your children. You can leave them the forested acres from your father, the carved cane from Uncle Claude, and the clock from your grandmother, but they can't inherit God from you. God can only be inherited from God.

That's what my mother was saying one night when I was six. As she kissed me good night and tucked me in, she said, "Now that you're trusting Jesus as your Savior, I'm your mother and your sister." She was acknowledging the words of Galatians 3:26: "In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith." We only become God's children through our faith, not through our parents' faith. I had gained a relationship with God in the same way she had. We both had become his daughters by adoption, through faith. I was not God's granddaughter who inherited God through my mother's relationship with him. I was God's daughter who inherited God directly from God.

*To all who did receive him, who believed in his name,  
he gave the right to become children of God. (John 1:12)*

Now although we cannot bequeath God to our children, we can help them know him and understand him in ways that prepare them to believe in his name. "Everyday" and "especially" traditions in a family are an important part of that teaching, of picturing who God is and what he's done in our home and in the world. Traditions are a vital way of displaying our greatest treasure, of showing what—Who—is most important to us.

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