

Homily – Rituals for Living

Rob Keim

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This church loves its rituals. This is true of most Episcopal or Anglican churches. We love ritual and pageantry and liturgy. We love the timeless beauty of the way that we do worship. Like I said, this community of God, we call St. Barnabas, loves its rituals.

Two thousand years ago, the ancient Hebrew people also loved their rituals. Rituals were not only defined in the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. Other cultural rituals had also developed over time for the Hebrews.

In today's Gospel reading we hear about Mary and Joseph taking Jesus to be presented at the Temple. Two thousand years ago, a ritual blessing was customary at the Temple. New babies were presented forty days after birth. And, part of the ritual was to offer a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord – a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons. The Hebrews of two thousand years ago certainly loved their rituals. And today our Gospel reading is about the presentation of Jesus since, February 2nd, today's date, is forty days after our traditional birthday for Jesus.

And, for the last two thousand years we have been ritualistically using the words of Simeon that we heard read just a few moments ago.

*Lord, you now have set your servant free
to go in peace as you have promised;
For these eyes of mine have seen the Savior,
whom you have prepared for all the world to see:
A Light to enlighten the nations,
and the glory of your people Israel.*

For two thousand years we have been using these words as spoken or sung poetry. In Latin this poem is known as the *Nunc Dimittis* or in English it is *the Song of Simeon*.

We have ritualized these words of Simeon such that they are said by millions of people each day. Human beings certainly like their rituals.

In his book, "Creating Rituals: A New Way of Healing of Everyday Life," Jim Clarke provides the follow definition of ritual. "A ritual is a symbolic action or series of actions, accompanied by meaningful words that encapsulate and express the cultural and personal values of the participants."

Clarke goes on to say, "A ritual gives body to the inner reality of the participants. This reality is then given power or affirmation by the presence of the witnessing community."

Let me share a story to help unpack this definition of ritual.

A few years back, I was at a mid-week Eucharist with about a dozen people. During that worship, someone got a text that a third teen had committed suicide at the local high school. Our group very quickly descended into anguish and grief. To this day, if I think about it too long the news of that third teen suicide still brings me to tears.

At that time, there were no words to express how we were feeling. But the very wise priest had us open up the Book of Common Prayer, that same red book that you have in the pew rack in front of you. She had us turn to some of the ritual prayers about grief and death, prayers that have been used for thousands of years by billions of people. When words failed us we fell back into ritual words and acts that are timeless. We were able to give expression to our feelings in ways that connected us back through the centuries to countless other people who have also felt anguish and grief.

Again, when words failed us and thoughts were jumbled, ritual prayers and ceremony helped give expression to our inner reality.

And besides rituals, I think there are other things that reveal this inner life to us.

For those of you that follow him, the Franciscan spiritual writer, Richard Rohr, has often blogged about how we know God.

Rohr writes that there are things that our thinking minds cannot do that our hearts can do. God created both of these capabilities within human beings. The thinking mind works with concepts, images and words and there is great value in the thinking mind. But, God is beyond the grasp of concepts. No words can capture God. No words can have the final word on the Christ made flesh and the Christ that dwells within each one of us.

However, our ability to love gives us the ability to grasp and hold God. God is eternal, and the human mind is finite. God cannot be comprehended or surrounded by a concept, but God can be experienced through love.

In the same vein, I wonder if poetry is the closest we can get to comprehending God with the written word. Poetry seduces and entices one into being a searcher for the Mystery. Poetry creates the heart leap, the gasp of breath, inspiring you to go further

and deeper. Poetry gives one resonance more than logical proof, and resonance is a way of the heart to access God. It resounds inside of you. It evokes and calls forth a deeper self.

Through love we can better know God, for love is the highest form of knowing. And, I think poetry helps us do this as well.

And, ritual, when it is done thoughtfully, can also help us embrace God. Ritual can help us breakthrough the sensible world and move beyond the human condition. It can help us pass from knowing to love.

Now, like anything, a strength can become a weakness. To our disappointment there are times when rituals have not been used to create communion, connection and compassion. To our shame, sometimes our church rituals have descended into legalism, exclusivity, and ritualism.

For me, ritualism is when our external rituals and intellectual beliefs are disconnected from the inner experience or inner transformation. Rituals become the end rather than the means to the end. And, sometimes this ritualism is taught by our clergy. We mistakenly teach that you can only come to God through us, by doing the right rituals, obeying the rules, and believing the right doctrines.

This mistake is certainly true at times today, and it was also true two thousand years ago. However, while Jesus honored the temple worship of his Jewish tradition, he also tried to enlighten people to realize that sacred buildings, rituals, and rules are the means and not the end. They are meant to bring us into the awareness of the divine presence in us and in all of those around us.

And, the primary, inner life transforming ritual taught to us by Jesus is the Eucharist.

At his last supper, which might also have been the Jewish Passover meal, Jesus gave us an action, a mime, a sacred ritual for his community that would summarize his core and lasting message for the world.

The Last Supper, or Eucharist, is an action which we are to keep repeating until his return. It is a mime to hold the group and teachings together. It is a sacred ritual we are to repeat over and over again as it slowly sinks inside of us.

The Eucharist, and the sharing of the bread and the wine, is a startling ritual. It is bloody, embodied, and sensual. It is a ritual that is meant to shock us into a realization of oneness with God. At its best the Christ that is in the bread and wine joins together with the Christ that is already inside us to transform our lived lives.

Obviously we have many other meaningful rituals that are part of our worship. Today we celebrate the ancient feast of Candlemas which at some point was layered onto the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple. The ritual blessing of candles was incorporated into this feast. This is in line with the theme of light that we have in the season of Epiphany. Originally, Candlemas was the old ending of what used to be the 40 days of Christmas. In the olden days we would bring our candles to church to be blessed by the priest. I imagine there are some of here today that have never celebrated Candlemas. And, the liturgical color for this feast is “white.” Even color becomes part of our rituals.

Now in general, rituals are not a cure all for all our human ills or a magic pill for the pains of life. Rather, they are an ancient, traditional way of honoring human reality, and using the language of the spirit. Unfortunately, in our postmodern society, we have lost our deep connection to the spirit and have forgotten its language. In our rational, scientific age, we have come to distrust the world of the imagination, and have failed to make use of its many gifts. The spirit is the place of deep emotions that are accessed through poetry, art, music, dreams, imagination, silence, and memories. The human spirit “reads” reality from a different perspective than the mind. God is bigger than we can comprehend or understand. And one last observation. In turbulent times, rituals can become even more meaningful because they are familiar, and you don’t have to think about them. Rituals are comforting.

Enjoy our worship today, as we tap into God with love, poetry and rituals.