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The Power of Rituals

I grew up in what most liturgically knowledgeable Episcopalians (of which I would not consider myself) would call a “snake belly low” church. There was nothing on the walls except for the Ten Commandments to the left of the pulpit and the Lord’s Prayer, Apostles Creed, and the Golden Rule to the right. Other than that there was a ginormous hourglass pulpit above a tiny four legged altar, white walls, clear windows, and velvet red pew cushions. There was no genuflecting, very little crossing, and certainly no smells or bells. In fact when I went to seminary I felt quite out of place, and frankly a bit ostracized for the mere fact that I grew up in the church in which I did. Knowing very little for the liturgical traditions and practices outside my own snake belly low congregation. But, of the little liturgical knowledge I held, what I did know from my time growing up in my own church was that there were those who kneeled and those who stood. Upon the entry of a new rector to our congregation sometime in the 90’s there appeared to be a move for more standing and less kneeling, or maybe it was an invitation to stand should you choose. Either way it was a lesson in highlighting the varied instructions and liturgical changes that are held within our 1979 edition of the Book of Common Prayer. And, this change of whether our knees hit the floor or stayed erect above our feet became the topic of many a conversation on our drives home from church each Sunday Morning. Because, as I was told “we (as a family unit) were kneeling people.” Not, heathens who stood upright during the prayers. But, humble bowers who followed the holy directions of God, or at the very least the tradition of our church and its members.

Now, I am most certainly exaggerating here. But, as a child it wasn’t hard for me to take on a stance that as a kneeler I was somehow elevated in my righteousness from those who stood. Given the right to judgmentally glare at the ritually unclean individuals who dared to stand during the prayers of the people, much less during the Holy Eucharist. And, it wasn’t a far leap to see myself as somehow more holy, virtuous, and therefore separate in the eyes of God from those who locked their knees and held their heads high while their souls were most certainly being brought low. And, I wonder if this is what Jesus is warning us against in our passage today from Mark. Warning us against the very real dangers of holding our religious traditions, rituals, orthodoxies, and convictions over and above right relationship with God, one another, and ultimately ourselves.

As Jesus calls the Pharisees out as hypocrites, he brings to light the fact that the Pharisees actions are no longer in line with the moral values they are proclaiming to espouse. As they seemingly judge Jesus and his disciples for ritually unclean hands, they do so in manner as to preclude Jesus and his disciples from the shared meal and table fellowship they desire to participate in. Where as the establishment of the cleanliness law to which the Pharisees point was originally intended for priests alone, to provide them with instructions on how to handle the food at the sacrificial altar, the pharisees took it one step further. Seeking to follow God’s word from Exodus, “You shall become a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” And so, within our passage from Mark, as Jesus criticizes the Pharisees calling them out as hypocrites, it is not

because of their desire to follow tradition, but instead their shortsightedness on what makes an individual acceptable to God. It is not simply one's ability to remain ritually pure, as Jesus goes on to say " nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." Drawing on the words of Isaiah Jesus tells us, "Is not this the fast that I choose: to lose the bonds of injustice?... Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house?" Because, for Jesus, what makes Israel, and in the same light you and I, acceptable to God, is not merely our adherence to correct performance of ritual acts, but our ability to live out lives that reveal God's loving kindness to the world.

In his book "The Universal Christ" Richard Rohr states that, "There's a real difference between harmless repetitive ceremonies and life-changing rituals. Scholars say that ceremonies normally confirm and celebrate the status quo and deny the shadow side of things, whereas true ritual offers an alternative universe, where the shadow is named." Meaning that through true ritual we are invited to throw away the hypocrisy the world so often calls us to take on and reclaim our true selves. As human beings we need a sense of order to feel secure. We need laws to organize our communities; we need doctrines to articulate our beliefs. These are not bad things. However, when we begin to worship what gives us a sense of order or bow down to a doctrine alone, we cease to be faithful to our Creator. It would seem to me then that our orthodoxy is only as beneficial as our orthopraxy. Meaning the religious rituals we participate in are only as redeeming as the ways in which they influence how we live and move and have our being past Sunday morning. Our rituals are only redeeming in and as much as they call us to reflect the Divine love and grace we find in the solace and comfort of their practice (i.e. here on Sunday mornings). When our practices and rituals, our sacred scriptures and our doctrines begin, or prove, only to exclude, insulate, and divide instead of creating avenues for inclusion, grace, and love they lose their sacred meaning and worth. They are no longer Divinely inspired, but instead insularly restricting.

One of the things I love most about our Episcopal church is our ability to come together Sunday morning and worship as one body. Whether or not we stand or kneel. Whether or not we believe in transubstantiation (the real presence of Jesus flesh and blood in our bread and wine) or that it is a beautiful reminder of Jesus' call for us to share table fellowship. I love how Rohr notes the difference between ceremonies and rituals, reminding us of the power of our own rituals to both point out our human frailty and shortcomings (as we confess our sins communally each week), while calling us to humility, and the Divine power of connection that comes from a gathered body of worshipers. Today, I believe Jesus is calling us to re-examine how it is that our Sunday morning rituals call us to be the Body of Christ in the world. From our reminder to read and study Scripture, confess our sins, and pray for our neighbors, to our invitation to share bread, give thanks, and go out into the world rejoicing in the power of the Spirit. May we hold these rituals, practices, and beliefs with the humility and grace needed to share God's compassion and love with the world.