

A HOME FOR FAITH

Pentecost 13, Year A: Exodus 12:1-14; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

One of my abiding fascinations is ritual, and the power it has in our lives and in our culture. You are probably not surprised by this admission, since pastors, at least those attached to congregations, are, by virtue of their call to lead corporate worship, ritualists. I'm not exactly sure when it was in my life that I first heard people accuse churches of being too invested in ritual, nor am I sure which Christian denomination was the easy target of such criticism; but I do remember through taking a course in ritual from Professor Ron Grimes of the Department of Religion and Culture at Wilfrid Laurier University how he levelled the playing field for me concerning ritual. For him, church ritual, what Lutherans usually refer to as liturgy, was just one part of a much larger subject. And what his course did for me, among other things, was develop an awareness of how our lives are full of ritual. Most of the time, we hardly notice that something we do is a ritual or has the value of a ritual for us. But it is there, nevertheless, making the ordinary special, creating landmarks in time, working change and transformation, setting apart people, places, and things for a special purpose, and bringing into focus an event upon which our imagination and thoughts can settle. The activities we undertake to celebrate birthdays and other special occasions, our preparation for the first day of school each September, the special clothing we wear when we are working, appointments with professionals whose help we need, weekly, monthly, or annual schedules we keep to – often these things have value and power for us because of their ritual component.

It's no wonder, though, that people immediately think of churches and corporate worship when they hear the word "ritual". Even the plainest of Christian traditions use ritual actions to clothe in fine raiment what might otherwise be quite commonplace and then to express which of their beliefs hold the highest value.

For example, if you were to attend worship at St. John's Church of Scotland in Gourock, where Paula and I have sojourned during the past five summers as part of the exchange with Glenn Chestnutt and family, you would probably not need an order of service to appreciate fully what was transpiring. Most Sundays worship consists of the familiar components of hymns, prayers, readings, and sermon. But you might be intrigued by the ritual that begins worship each Sunday. Toward the end of the organ prelude, the door to the right of the platform opens, and people immediately rise to their feet as the Church Officer, a distinguished elder wearing a tailored business suit and holding the very large pulpit Bible, enters the Sanctuary followed by the minister. All eyes, including the minister's, are riveted on the Church Officer as he climbs the flight of stairs to the pulpit and places the huge black book on the reading desk. The pulpit is at least 12 feet above the platform, and probably 15 feet above main floor of the Sanctuary. When the Church Officer arrives back at floor level, he bows his head and shoulders toward the minister who then reciprocates by bowing his head and shoulders to the Church Officer. The congregation remains standing until the minister takes his place behind the communion table and sits down.

Not a word is uttered through this ritual, but in its actions the assembly shows its reverence for the Word of God, communicates the primacy of the ministry of the laity in the Church of Scotland, watches as the mutual respect held for both the lay and ordained leaders of the congregation is mimed – the Church Officer and minister bow to each other – and, of course, notes silently the place of honour that is given to Holy Scripture and the proclaimed Word of God in their tradition. Ritual is everywhere, but yes, it is conspicuous in our corporate expressions of faith in God, in how we and others worship.

And so, when we read from Exodus the instructions for celebrating the Passover, when we listen to St. Paul teach his congregation how to live in the promise of Christ's return, and when we hear Jesus say to his disciples that whenever two or three are gathered in his name, he is truly present, we cannot help noticing how these instructions, this teaching, and this promise of Jesus' real presence inform our rituals and how our rituals seek to hold our beliefs.

The Passover meal, the Seder, recounts in ritual the central act of salvation in Jewish history, God's intervention on behalf of the people of Israel at a time when they were held captive as slaves in Egypt. The exodus itself was a liturgy that included God's calling Moses away from his life as a shepherd, Moses' return to Egypt from Midian to assume a position of leadership with the people of Israel, continuous pleading with the pharaoh to release the Israelites from oppression, suffering through plagues, and at length, the miraculous escape from Egypt. The ritual meal not only keeps the story alive, it

provides for, as this morning's reading from Exodus tells us, remembrance and celebration from year to year, and from generation to generation. To this day, Passover is observed annually, but the power of story and ritual both form and inform faith; they create a community and provide an identity as those whom God loved and still loves; as those for whom God had compassion, and then on whose behalf took action.

The apostle Paul realizes that to form Christian community, the members of his congregation must live the love they find so attractive in the life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus; that, as Paul says, they must "put on the Lord Jesus" for themselves so that all the things they have done formerly that has destroyed the fabric of the community may be (as he says) "laid aside". Is there a ritual that mirrors this passage? Well yes, Holy Baptism, with all of its imagery of death of the old self and rising again to newness of life, the baptized putting on a white baptismal robe signifying putting on their new life in Christ. Paul does not refer directly to the ritual in the passage we have as our Second Reading this morning, but he is calling his congregation to allow the event of their baptism to deepen their understanding of Jesus' teaching and witness, and then inform how they live with one another as a community anticipating Christ's coming again. Paul knows that living faithfully will engender faithful living; that faith is held in the community; and that a faithful Christian community, dare I say it, ritualizes the indwelling Spirit of the risen Christ.

And then, in the postscript to today's Gospel, in one little sentence Matthew includes at the end of instructions on disciplining a member of the church, Jesus suggests Christian community as the place in which we might come to know his real presence. "Where two or three are gathered in my name," he says at the end of the reading, "I am there among them."

There is no better reason than this for gathering for worship and for embracing our rituals of praying, singing, proclamation of Word and Sacrament, serving Christ by serving one another, and in giving our time, talent, and treasure for the sake of the community and its mission. We are not only gathered by Word and Sacrament, we are gathered by the anticipation of Christ's real presence within us, among us, and through us. And it is through all this activity and through the gift of sacred ritual that we prepare a home for faith; that we become Christ's church.

I spend a lot of time in this building. You may know it, as I know it, as a busy place full of people and activity from one end of the week to the other. It is our congregation's base for mission, it is a place of prayer, it is often a place of sanctuary and healing. But I must tell you that when I am alone in this building, as I often am on Saturdays, it is a lonely place and an empty place. It is just a building. "The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people," the old children's song reminds us. It is a home for faith only when there are two or three gathered in Christ's name. It is a home for faith only when we enter into the rituals of gathering and worshipping and working and planning and learning and serving. Faith is held in community, and our call as the community of the faithful is to be nothing less. Together, we make a home for faith – in all of the things we do together as church. And in things such as this week's barbecue for our neighbours and friends, we make sure that the doors and windows of this home are open and welcoming.

This is our second annual community barbecue. There's a standing joke in church circles that the second time a church does something it becomes a tradition; and at the third time, "we've always done it this way." Could it also be a ritual?