



Renewing Rituals

How Holy Habits Can Enrich Your Life

2023 Lenten Study
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INTRODUCTION

The pandemic changed my coffee habits. Before the pandemic I often got a cup at a coffee shop and then went to work, but during the pandemic I started making coffee in my office. I bought a little coffee maker which sets atop my filing cabinet. Every morning the first thing I do is make a small pot. It has become a daily ritual. Over time, even the way I make the coffee became ritualized. Now it doesn't feel 'natural' to just come in and start working. I must make the coffee before I can write a sermon, reply to an email, or even say a prayer.

Like our belly buttons, everybody has rituals. In one sense, a ritual is simply a routine of doing something the same way. For our purposes I will define ***a ritual as a set of practices directed toward a goal. A religious ritual is a set of practices directed toward God as our ultimate desire.***

A "sacrament" is a special type of religious ritual. It is a ritual established by Jesus in the Gospels, and it is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. There are many rituals that are outward signs/inward grace—"means of grace,"—but sacraments are understood to be regular and reliable means of grace for all believers. In the Protestant tradition there are two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Depending on your view of God, some religious rituals are life-giving and others are destructive.

Rituals are life-giving when they enable us to experience and become aware of God's liberating love in all of life. They invoke the God who is a "trinity of love"—love embodied in Jesus and love in us and around us through the Holy Spirit.

In contrast, religious rituals that do not give life are ones that perpetuate relationships of harm. They mask dynamics of destruction by inaccurately portraying God as causing or tolerating evil. In short, they "blaspheme"—misuse—the name of God. For this reason the prophets criticized the Israelite's misuse of rituals and Jesus called out the leaders of his day as hypocrites.

When rituals convey the gift of life they tap into how we were created by God. We were created in the image of God, and an image only exists in relationship to the object it reflects. We reflect God, who is love: "God is love and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." (1 John 4:16, NRSV)

Humans are created with a desire (love) for God, and our desires are fulfilled in God. This does not mean that our other desires are wrong. Rather, all our various desires have their meaning and goodness when they are experienced in God's loving presence. The psalmist summed it up: "Take delight in the Lord and [God] will give you your heart's desires." (37:4)

Often other desires take the place of our fundamental desire for God. Sin is desire misdirected; desire malfunctioning. We make other things the object of our desire which cannot fulfill us. A good religious ritual helps direct our central desire to God. As a result, good rituals help us see God's love in all aspects of life.

All this talk about desires implies something about how we humans learn. We learn first by doing. Our lives are shaped by habits. The habits change our actions, and over time the habits change our attitudes. Eventually those habits shape our outlook. A good religious ritual is a habit that reshapes our actions, attitudes, and outlook by the love of God.

The purpose of this study is to explore and experiment with rituals that raise our awareness of the presence of the loving God in our lives and to conform our habits to the love of Christ. God's love is all around us and God's love in Christ transforms us, but too often we are not aware of or receptive to it. Our awareness of grace is fleeting. Through the use of rituals, we remain more aware of and regularly changed by grace.

In the Wesleyan tradition, rituals are referred to as "means of grace." This means that the ritual does not save us; only God's grace does that. But God uses these human practices as channels for the Spirit to give us grace. Through rituals, God gets down on our level and speaks our language. The more we practice them, the more we can experience grace that will shape our outlook and actions throughout all areas of our lives.

These rituals are countercultural. We are shaped by a wide variety of secular rituals—routines of community, commerce, and citizenship. These rituals instill habits that conform us to their worldviews, such as patriotism and consumerism. Sometimes (often) these habits and worldviews are at odds with the Gospel. They misdirect our desires away from God. And so, rituals that reorient us back to God's love are countercultural.

Paul told the Romans:

"I appeal to you therefore, kindred, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." (12:1-2, NRSV)

Practicing Christian rituals help free us from thoughts and habits that destroy our lives and the world. Rituals grounded in grace enable us to see God's hope in the world and empower us to live into that hope.

To be sure, Christian rituals can and have been misused. There are two ways they have been distorted.

One, rituals are corrupted when they become an end in themselves. Jesus criticized the

religious leaders of his day for performing rituals without examining their motivations. He warned the disciples about the hypocrisy of ritualism.

Two, Christian rituals have been used to support injustice and rationalize evil in society. The prophets condemned the Israelites for their strict observance of sacrifices and religious festivals while they violated God's law to do justice and mercy for the poor. The history of the church is ripe with examples of Christian rituals misused to glorify patriotism and ignore social ills.

Neither Jesus nor the prophets rejected rituals in and of themselves. Rather, they called us to perform them with the right intentions of reorienting our lives toward the love of God and neighbor. When we practice rituals with this in mind, these holy habits will increase our awareness of God's love and deepen our commitment to loving one another in the name of Jesus.

In short, you could say that the use of rituals help percolate grace in our lives.

There is an essential feature of my morning coffee ritual. While I wait for the pot to fill, I read a proper from a prayer book. A proper is a part of liturgy, often a short prayer that varies according to the date or special observance of the week or day (i.e. it is "proper" for that occasion). I have been using the "Anglican Book of Worship" (Canada) and the "New Zealand Book of Prayer" this year. God uses the combination of Coffee Mate and liturgy to fill me with grace for the day.

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Reflection Questions:

What (if any) religious rituals were significant in your childhood?

What are the prominent desires you see in our society? Which ones are promoted and monetized? Which ones are discouraged and prohibited?

When have you experienced a ritual that made you feel close to God?

When have you seen a religious ritual used to hurt someone?

SESSION ONE: REPENTING RITUALS

Introduction

When was the last time you said, “I’m sorry.”?

Repentance was a key part of Jesus’s message. His inaugural sermon was one sentence: “Repent, for the reign of heaven has come near.” (Matthew 4:17)

In this session we will explore the meaning of repentance, and explore rituals for confessing our sins that lead to healing and new direction in our lives.

Matthew 3:1-12

¹In those days John the Baptist came to the Judean wilderness and began preaching. His message was ²“Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”

³The prophet Isaiah was speaking about John when he said,

“He is a voice shouting in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord’s coming!
Clear the road for him!’”

⁴John’s clothes were woven from coarse camel hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. For food he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁵People from Jerusalem and from all of Judea and all over the Jordan Valley went out to see and hear John. ⁶And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River.

⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to watch him baptize, he denounced them. “You brood of snakes!” he exclaimed. “Who warned you to flee the coming wrath? ⁸Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God.

⁹Don’t just say to each other, ‘We’re safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.’ That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones. ¹⁰Even now the ax of God’s judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹“I baptize with water those who repent of their sins and turn to God. But someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I’m not worthy even to be his slave and carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹² He is ready to separate the chaff from the wheat with his winnowing fork. Then he will clean up the threshing area, gathering the wheat into his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire.”

Put in your own words, “Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”

What did John's baptism symbolize?

What is John warning them about?

Overview

On Feb. 21, 1988, televangelist Jimmy Swaggart went on the air in front of his Baton Rouge, La., congregation and admitted to committing adultery. He said, in part: "I do not plan in any way to whitewash my sin. I do not call it a mistake, a mendacity; I call it sin.... I have no one but myself to blame. I do not lay the fault or the blame of the charge at anyone else's feet. For no one is to blame but Jimmy Swaggart. I take the responsibility. I take the blame. I take the fault."

Looking directly at his wife in the congregation, he said, sobbing, "I have sinned against you, and I beg your forgiveness."

He concluded his five-minute sermon by reading Psalm 51.

Not only do televangelists need to repent, Paul reminds us that all of us need to confess our sins from time to time because "everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard." (Romans 1:23)

The Greek word for repentance is "metanoia," which means to change one's mind, and with it to change one's actions. The first step of repentance is the confession of one's sins.

Over the centuries Christians have practiced various ways of confessing sins and doing penance. Matthew 18:15-22 indicates a process for holding a church member accountable and a path toward reconciliation.

The season of Lent was a period of examination and confession of sin in preparation for Easter and, in particular, for the baptism of new converts.

The Rule of St. Benedict (516 A.D.) outlines how a monk can return to good graces with the monastic community that involved, in part, lying face down on the sanctuary floor. The Celtic Christians in the seventh century developed forms of confession and penance to match the severity of the sin. By the 12th century private confession to a priest (ala, the confession booth) became the norm as the first step toward penance ("Say two 'Our Fathers' and three 'Hail Marys'....").

The first Methodists did their confessing in small groups called bands. Each week the band met and discussed questions like, "When did you last sin?" As strange as that sounds, the dynamics were more akin to a 12-step group than the typical Sunday service.

Today we practice a ritual of a prayer of confession every communion Sunday and every Sunday during Lent. Lest we think the need for repentance is only a religious thing, it was the premise of a recent television show, “My Name is Earl.”

There is a universal human need to repent, to get all this stuff off our chests, and come to terms with our mistakes. Sometimes we need a ritual to express the depth of our regret and to help us make sense of the convoluted dynamics of our brokenness.

The rituals and rites of penance involve multiple steps: confession of sin, pronouncement of forgiveness (absolution), and acts of restitution and possibly reconciliation (penance). Each part reflects our basic need to be honest about ourselves without staying trapped in guilt, and the opportunity to be released from past mistakes so that we can begin a new chapter of our lives.

Repenting rituals can malfunction. Sometimes they become an empty ritual that white-washes the real harm that has been done, and can even support self-delusions of innocence. Or sometimes the person gets stuck in a loop of shame and the ritual perpetuates the shame.

Consider these criteria for an authentic ritual of repentance that leads to a fuller life:

- The ritual enables us to be honest with ourselves and before God.
- The ritual brings an end to the repetition of guilt.
- The ritual allows us to move toward a new chapter in our lives.

God’s mercy in Jesus Christ is the premise for an authentic ritual of repentance. We can confess our sins because God is ready, willing, and able to forgive us. We can take an honest look at ourselves because God has already looked upon us with grace and not rejection. We can move on because God gives us the gift of a new start through the power of Christ’s resurrection. This is truly Good News.

Discussion and Reflection Questions

How might a ritual of repentance help an individual come to terms with the problems in his or her lives?

When might a ritual perpetuate a sense of guilt and shame?

What kinds of things should a group (such as a denomination or a country) confess and repent of?

What happens to us and others when we are never willing to admit we have done wrong?

Personal Reflection

What sins do you need to confess?

What penance do you need to do?

Ideas for Rituals

Prayer of Confession

Use the prayer of confession and words of assurance that are printed in each week's bulletin as a personal prayer or as part of table grace with your family.

Prayers for the Nation

This is a variation on using written prayers of confession for personal use. Identify recent problems in society that have touched you. Read the prayer below and name those problems in the appropriate place in the prayer:

Almighty God,
whose mercy preserves the universe
and whose truth points us toward your peace,
forgive us for _____.
Redirect us toward your life-giving ways
and use me as an instrument of your peace
for the healing of the world,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Reconciliation by Water or Fire

Two of the biblical symbols for the Holy Spirit are fire and water. This exercise is a ritual that expresses our confession of sin and the assurance of forgiveness that the Spirit gives us. There are two ways to do the ritual: one with fire and the other with water. The instructions are written for individual use, but they can be modified to be used with a family or group.

Step 1: Get some water or start a fire.

Step 2: Pray, "Lord, send your Spirit to cleanse me. May Christ make me a living sacrifice so that in every place I may praise you and proclaim your loving compassion, through Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen."

Step 3: Read Psalm 51.

Step 4: Confess your sins symbolically. If using water, write them on your hand with washable ink. If using fire, write them down on a piece of paper.

Step 5: Symbolize the forgiveness for and freedom from sin that God offers you. If using water, wash your hands. If using fire, burn your list of sins.

Step 6: Say aloud, "Hear the good news: Christ died for me while I was yet a sinner; that proves God's love for me. In the name of Jesus Christ, I am forgiven. Glory to God. Amen."

SESSION TWO: GATHERING RITUALS

Introduction

When your family or close friends get together, how do you greet them?

Fred Flintstone and Barney Rubble were members of the Loyal Order of Water Buffaloes. Lodge members greeted each other with this secret handshake:

1. Raise hands and wiggle fingers;
2. Touch thumb to thumb and twist thumbs while saying, “Woo awah, woo awah;”
3. Wiggle fingers, then grip hands and touch thumbs while saying, “A woo, wa woo, wa woo;”
4. Shake hands.

Fred and Barney were practicing a gathering ritual. This session explores the different ways we welcome and include one another into the fellowship of Christ. These rituals express our need to belong and find purpose by being together in the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 9:9-13

⁹As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at his tax collector’s booth. “Follow me and be my disciple,” Jesus said to him. So Matthew got up and followed him.

¹⁰Later, Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. ¹¹But when the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with such scum?”

¹²When Jesus heard this, he said, “Healthy people don’t need a doctor—sick people do.” ¹³Then he added, “Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: ‘I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.’ For I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners.”

What are the three different groups in this story? How do they interact with each other?

Why were the Pharisees so upset?

How is Jesus eating at Matthew’s home an example of Jesus’s mission?

Overview

From trumpet calls to handshakes to initiation ceremonies, a wide variety of formal and informal rituals bring us together. Most of them are seemingly insignificant, such as say-

ing “Peace of Christ” or singing a theme song. Initiation ceremonies for fraternities and sororities bring people into the group. In “Lord of the Rings,” the warning beacons of Gondor are lit to gather the tribes together for battle.

The sacraments include elements of gathering us together.

Baptism welcomes the believer into the church, the family of God. After the individual is baptized, the congregation says, “We give thanks for all that God has already given you, and we welcome you in Christian love. As members together with you in the body of Christ and in this congregation of The United Methodist Church, we renew our covenant.”

The Lord’s Supper is practiced with visible symbols of gathering around a common table, and the symbols of sharing a common cup and a loaf of bread.

Our contemporary culture is marked by isolation. Social media is a double-edged sword. While it helps us connect with one another, it also creates a false sense of community where everyone is a “friend,” and where we can stay stuck in an echo chamber of like-minded people. When God brings us together in real and authentic ways we experience grace that renews our lives.

The rituals of gathering bespeak three universal human desires.

One, they convey a sense of belonging. The ritual affirms that we are part of the group, and part of our identity comes from belonging. We are members, for example, of the body of Christ.

Two, the ritual makes us part of something bigger than ourselves, and this gives our lives significance. Not only are we part of the church, we are participants in God’s worldwide mission, the Kingdom of God.

Three, these rituals gather us together so that we can actually touch and see one another and be touched and seen by others. We are no longer invisible. We are recognized and affirmed for who we are. Belonging, significance, affirmation. Gathering rituals make us aware of the way Christ fulfills these desires when we are together.

Gathering rituals malfunction when we do not gather in the Spirit of Jesus. For example, the Nazis understood the power of rituals to initiate and bring people together, such as the Nuremburg rallies or the initiation into the Hitler Youth.

Gathering rituals malfunction when they exclude people who are seeking Jesus. We have seen this in churches where some people are excluded from membership and leadership because of their racial, gender, or sexual identity. Currently the United Meth-

odist Church is malfunctioning because of its exclusionary policies regarding LGBTQ believers, and the discontinuity between its policies and its rituals is stunning.

But when we gather in the love of Christ, our faith grows in ways that are impossible to discover by ourselves. It sounds basic but it is true. When we are physically with others, we are less distracted by the temptations of multitasking. We are pulled out of our normal routines and regular settings so that we can focus on God's word and will for our lives. When we must look someone in the face and hear their voice, it diminishes our stereotypes and animosities. Hebrews' advice is just as relevant today as ever: "Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some." (10:24-25)

This is not to say that you cannot worship or participate online. We are blessed by technology to connect us. This is especially true for those who are homebound and cannot physically be at a church. Even so, there is still a need for folks to be physically present with one another. All the more, the challenge is for the abled-bodied members to reach out to those who are homebound. One of the neglected needs of the church is to explore rituals that gather us with those who cannot be physically present in the church building.

Discussion and Reflection Questions

Over the past two years, what has been your pattern of participation in church?

Does that pattern need to change? If so, what is preventing you from changing it?

When has your faith been affirmed or challenged by being part of a group?

How might baptism and communion make you feel more connected to other believers?

Is there a fellow church member you need to reconnect with?

Ideas for Rituals

Prayer of Preparation for Worship

Before gathering for worship with others, use this prayer as a weekly ritual of preparation for worship:

God of grace,
you have given us minds to know you,

hearts to love you,
and voices to sing your praise.
Fill us with your Spirit,
that we may celebrate your glory
and worship you in spirit and in truth,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

[Taken from "Book of Common Worship," Presbyterian Church USA.]

Table Grace

One of the places we gather with family and friends is at the dinner table. A simple prayer before a meal is a time-honored ritual for gathering. Begin the ritual by lighting a candle, then offer the prayer. There are many table graces. Here is one you can use from John Wesley:

Be present at our table, Lord;
Be here and everywhere adored.
Thy creatures bless, and grant that we
May feast in paradise with thee.

This grace can be sung to the hymn tune "The Old 100th," which is the doxology "Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow," number 95 in "The United Methodist Hymnal."

Wednesday Morning Communion

Every Wednesday from 7:30-7:45 a.m. in Lent, communion will be served in North's chapel. This is a short service of prayers, readings, and the Lord's Supper. Make it your Lenten practice to gather with others to share the sacrament.

SESSION THREE: CELEBRATING RITUALS

Introduction

What was the most recent birthday or anniversary you celebrated?

Last year I attended my 40th high school class reunion. Nearly everyone who attended had gone to school with one another from kindergarten through 12th grade. Four decades later the only thing we had in common was this one shared experience, but it was enough to bring us back together.

In this session we explore the many ways we celebrate the common and special ways God is in our lives.

Matthew 14:22-33

²²Immediately after this, Jesus insisted that his disciples get back into the boat and cross to the other side of the lake, while he sent the people home. ²³After sending them home, he went up into the hills by himself to pray. Night fell while he was there alone.

²⁴Meanwhile, the disciples were in trouble far away from land, for a strong wind had risen, and they were fighting heavy waves. ²⁵About three o'clock in the morning Jesus came toward them, walking on the water. ²⁶When the disciples saw him walking on the water, they were terrified. In their fear, they cried out, "It's a ghost!"

²⁷But Jesus spoke to them at once. "Don't be afraid," he said. "Take courage. I am here!"

²⁸Then Peter called to him, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you, walking on the water."

²⁹"Yes, come," Jesus said.

So Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he saw the strong wind and the waves, he was terrified and began to sink. "Save me, Lord!" he shouted.

³¹Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him. "You have so little faith," Jesus said. "Why did you doubt me?"

³²When they climbed back into the boat, the wind stopped. ³³Then the disciples worshiped him. "You really are the Son of God!" they exclaimed.

If you had been in the boat what would have been your reaction to Jesus and to Peter?

When does the wind die down?

How do they react to Jesus at the end of the story?

Overview

Rituals of celebration are perhaps the most familiar rituals. Weddings are rituals celebrating the love of a couple. Singing “Happy Birthday” while we blow out the candles is a ritual celebrating the individual. Many celebrating rituals are commemorations of everything from working for 30 years for a company to the winners of this year’s bowling league. When I was a kid, I remember my home congregation celebrated paying off the mortgage by gathering on the front lawn to watch the leaders burn the paperwork.

Our faith is enriched when we celebrate the presence of God in our lives. Some rituals commemorate an extraordinary moment when God rescued us. This was what the disciples were doing on board the boat. Celebrating these moments evokes gratitude and renews our commitment to God.

Other rituals celebrate the subtle, ordinary ways God sustains our daily lives. This is the purpose of the ancient tradition of the Daily Office, which is a daily schedule of appointed times to pause for prayer, scripture, and praise. These regular pauses return our awareness to the presence of the divine by offering God praise and thanksgiving. One of the key functions of Sunday congregational worship is to help us reset our minds and hearts for the upcoming week with praise for God.

Between Sundays, our lives are enriched by little rituals that honor God. Personal times of prayer mark us with praise. Family rituals such as saying grace at meals help us pause and become aware of God.

Here is an exercise to help you become aware of God’s grace in your life. Make a “time-line of grace” about your life.

First, draw a line with your date of birth at one end and today’s date at the other end.

Next, plot on the line the events of your life—the good and the bad.

Then, below the line under each event, write down one word that describes how God was or might have been at work at that time. (It is not important that you were aware of the presence of God at the time.)

Circle those moments when God’s grace is most apparent, and mark those dates for you to celebrate annually.

Discussion and Reflection Questions

When you pray, how often do you begin or end your prayer with a word of praise or thanksgiving?

When you look back across our life, are there moments when God helped you (even if at the time you did not realize it) that you need to remember and celebrate now?

Who do you need to celebrate with?

Ideas for Rituals

Praise Walk

Make walking and prayer your personal ritual of praise. As you walk, look and listen for God's presence in your surroundings, and give God thanks for walking with you. Ponder your day as you walk, and praise God for being with you throughout the day.

Praise and Music

Whether alone or with others, make music a part of your ritual of celebrating God's grace throughout the week. Choose a favorite hymn for the week or take them from the Sunday bulletin and sing one hymn each day. You can make singing one verse of a favorite hymn your table grace with family. If you do not like to sing, play music as part of your personal devotion time.

Thank You Notes

During Lent, make it a weekly ritual to write a thank you note to someone. As you address the envelope, say a prayer of thanksgiving for what that person means to you.

Commemorate and Donate

One way to celebrate the presence of God we have experienced in one another is to make a donation. Give a financial gift in honor or memory of someone each year on his or her birthday or another significant date. Make a commitment to serve God by supporting a cause that reflects the aspirations of a person who was a faithful witness to you.

SESSION FOUR: MOURNING RITUALS

Introduction

What was the most poignant funeral or memorial service you have attended? What made it so meaningful for you?

To date I have done 360 funerals, which is an average of nearly 11 a year. They have ranged from two people to hundreds in attendance, from no music to full choirs, from gravesides to marbled sanctuaries. But the one thing they have in common is the need to express how the mourners feel through ritual.

This session explores how God enriches our lives through rituals of mourning. Mourning rituals are meant to help the living, not the deceased. Because we experience the death of many different kinds of relationships and things, mourning rituals help us discover God in the many different experiences of loss.

Matthew 26:6-13

⁶Meanwhile, Jesus was in Bethany at the home of Simon, a man who had previously had leprosy. ⁷While he was eating, a woman came in with a beautiful alabaster jar of expensive perfume and poured it over his head.

⁸The disciples were indignant when they saw this. "What a waste!" they said. ⁹"It could have been sold for a high price and the money given to the poor."

¹⁰But Jesus, aware of this, replied, "Why criticize this woman for doing such a good thing to me? ¹¹You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me. ¹²She has poured this perfume on me to prepare my body for burial. ¹³I tell you the truth, wherever the Good News is preached throughout the world, this woman's deed will be remembered and discussed."

How was the woman expressing her grief? What does her grief tell us about her understanding of who Jesus was?

Were the disciples trying to honor Jesus with their suggestion, or were they living in denial of what lay ahead for them and Jesus?

Why should this woman be "remembered and discussed" wherever the Gospel is preached?

Overview

Laying a wreath on a tomb. Placing dirt on a casket. Wearing black. These and many more practices are rituals of mourning. The practice of such rituals goes back to the origins of humanity. There is a basic universal need to demarcate our loss.

Besides the death of a person, there are many other events and relationships that we mourn. A divorce, a retirement, and the closure of a church are all a kind of death. Unfortunately we have not always recognized them as such, but we would benefit from rituals to mark their passing.

“The United Methodist Book of Worship” provides rituals that acknowledge these deaths: an Order of Farewell to a Pastor, an Order of Farewell to Church Members, and an Order for the Leave-Taking of a Church Building. It also includes a ritual for acknowledging a divorce.

Mourning rituals enrich our lives in four ways.

First, they mark the time needed to grieve. Previous generations did this by wearing black armbands for an extended period.

Second, they help us find meaning to the loss.

Third, they often help us express our gratitude for the deceased.

Fourth, they prepare us for the next phase of our lives beyond the loss.

Rituals of mourning are avenues through which God’s presence can be known. God renews our faith in grieving through the revelation of Christ. We see the compassion of Christ on the cross who shares our suffering. We see the hope of Christ in his resurrection, as he gives us the gift of hope and new life beyond the pain.

Discussion and Reflection Questions

What loss (such as a person, relationship, or job) hit you the hardest? What made it hard?

How can the avoidance of mourning or mourning the wrong way have a negative impact on us?

What biblical stories or sayings have helped you grieve?

What do you find hopeful about faith in Christ? How can rituals of mourning express this hope?

Ideas for Rituals

Object of Remembrance

Often symbolic objects have been used to commemorate the deceased, and are used in rituals as a focal point for expressing grief.

Step 1: Choose a time of day that allows for ample time (for example, 30 minutes), and no distractions.

Step 2: Choose an image or object as your focal point for meditation that symbolizes what you are mourning.

Step 3: As you begin, sit in a comfortable position and quiet your mind from other thoughts as you begin breathing slowly in rhythm.

Step 4: Focus on the object or image. What memories does it evoke? What feelings do you have?

Step 5: End your meditation with a prayer.

Step 6: Place the object in an appropriate place. For some, that may mean removing, destroying, or giving away the object to mark that you are moving into a new phase of your life.

Stories of Remembrance

When appropriate, spend intentional time with others telling stories of the deceased. Pick a special day, such as their birthday or the anniversary of their death. If appropriate, make a toast. Close the conversation with a prayer of thanksgiving.

Worship with the Saints

On Sunday morning when you sit in the sanctuary, remember your fellow church members who died. As the prelude is being played, name them in your hearts, look around at where they used to sit. Give God thanks for their service. Look up and around at the sanctuary as you think about the spiritual reality of worship, including both those in heaven as well as those on earth. Read this verse from Charles Wesley's hymn

“Come, Let Us Join Our Friends Above” (number 709 in “The United Methodist Hymnal”):

“Come, let us join our friends above who have obtained the prize,
and on the eagle wings of love to joys celestial rise.
Let saints on earth unite to sing with those to glory gone,
for all the servants of our King in earth and heaven are one.”

SESSION FIVE: DEDICATING RITUALS

Introduction

What is the most significant commitment you have made in your life?

One of the earliest acts of dedication I made was as a Cub Scout. Every den meeting began with the Scout Oath: “On my honor I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout law; to help other people at all times; to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight.”

Heady stuff for a kid. It didn’t last too long. By the end of the year I dropped out. Kudos to my colleagues who went the distance and became Eagle Scouts.

This session we explore ways to express our dedication to Christ—which I hope for you lasts longer than my scouting experience.

Matthew 16:24-28

²⁴Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. ²⁵If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. ²⁶And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul? ²⁷For the Son of Man will come with his angels in the glory of his Father and will judge all people according to their deeds. ²⁸And I tell you the truth, some standing here right now will not die before they see the Son of Man coming in his Kingdom.”

What are the three things they must do to be his followers in verse 24? How is each one a different, but related, step of dedication?

Think about how you spend your time, money, and emotional resources. What does this tell you about your priorities and values?

How does it make you feel to think that God “will judge all people according to their deeds”?

Overview

Lent is a season of preparation for making a commitment to the risen Christ. And so, it is fitting that we end this study with rituals of dedication.

In the church there are three rituals that are connected with the thread of dedication: Baptism, confirmation, and ordination.

In baptism, we respond to God's dedication to us in Jesus Christ by dedicating ourselves and our children to God. The initial dedication of baptism is further expressed in the ritual of confirmation when the youth affirms the faith for themselves. If a person is called to pastoral ministry, their baptismal covenant is expressed through the ritual of ordination because every calling to a specific ministry is rooted in the foundational calling of our baptism.

The element of human commitment in all three rituals is based on the greater commitment God makes to us. In baptism we celebrate that God embraces us as beloved children. In confirmation we receive the greater act of confirmation that the Holy Spirit does in us by confirming our spiritual identity. In ordination we acknowledge the gifts God has given an individual for ministry.

There are three types of dedicating rituals.

One, there are inaugural dedications that express the beginnings of our commitment to a task or lifestyle. Swearing-in ceremonies are an example of this.

Two, there are annual dedications in which a pledge is renewed. In Matthew 16, Jesus is preparing them to renew their commitment as they go to Jerusalem and Calvary, where the initial commitment they made in Galilee will be tested. In the same vein, Stewardship Sundays are annual rituals of dedication. The early Methodists celebrate New Year's Eve watch night services as an annual rededication of their faith.

Three, there are daily rituals of rededication which are done by individuals and weekly rituals of recommitment performed in Sunday services by churches. For example, the closing song is a hymn of dedication.

Why do we need dedicating rituals? These rituals remind and reorient us. They remind us of whose we are. We are the disciples of Jesus Christ, and all other labels and commitments are secondary. They reorient us to whom we serve, Jesus Christ.

Discussion and Reflection Questions

What is the state of your faith today in comparison with last year? With five years ago?

What areas of your life have you yet to fully dedicate to Christ? What would you have to give up, and what would you have start doing?

What might be the benefits of a life more fully committed to the way of Jesus?

Ideas for Rituals

Fasting and Abstinence

Fasting is a form of prayer expressed through a temporary and intentional abstaining from food. In the Bible fasting was done for repentance (e.g. Joel 2:12-13) and intercession (e.g. Acts 14:23).

The purpose of fasting is twofold. The act of a temporary abstinence assists the heart and mind to focus on that which is being prayed for. Also, the physical deprivation embodies the desires of the petitioner.

The practice of fasting Thursday and Friday was recommended by John Wesley and was a staple among early Methodists. It imitated the sequence of Jesus's Passion.

There are many different ways to fast besides this format. For more on fasting, read Chapter 4 of Richard Foster's "The Celebration of Discipline." Keep in mind that fasting is more than skipping a meal. It is a time of prayer and reflection.

I recommend fasting only from solid foods; continue to drink fluids and liquid meals (no alcohol).

If you are unable to fast, this exercise can be done by abstaining from something else that is a normal part of your day that gives you comfort or pleasure.

Besides fasting from food, there are many other ways to practice abstinence. Lent is famous for being a season to give up everything from chocolate to television. Whatever it may be, consider these steps to prepare for fasting or abstinence:

Step 1: Select a specific day and time for your fast.

Step 2: Select a specific topic or theme on which to meditate and pray while you are fasting.

Step 3: Select specific scripture readings and other writings to guide your reflections.

Bring your fast to an end with a song, a prayer of thanksgiving, and a simple meal.

Offering at Dinner

In addition to saying grace, take up an offering at dinner every night this week. Before the week begins, designate something as your offering box and keep it in the center of the table. For example, you can decorate a small box or jar. On the first night, discuss and decide what cause or organization will receive your donation. Every night collect your loose coins and change when you say grace over your meal.

Hymn of Dedication

The last hymn of the Sunday service is a hymn of dedication. It is chosen to express our commitment to God as we end worship and go on with our daily lives.

Take the bulletin home and use this hymn as part of your daily prayers to assist you in renewing your commitment to God. (For a copy of the lyrics, download the bulletin from our website, www.northchurchindy.com/past-bulletins/.)

About the Cover Art:

Our cover art comes from a banner designed and created by the late Doris Douglas, a longtime member of North UMC. It is entitled "The Miracle of the Wedding at Canaan." You can see the entire banner on our altar this Lent.

Jesus's first miracle was at the wedding in Canaan, with remembrances of those who gathered for the festive event visiting among the large variety of stone jars filled with wine. The white jug at the bottom reminds us of the purity of Jesus and the miracle of changing the water into wine that was performed. The Greek cross in the center of the jug is the cross of Christ, revealing his power at this miracle time. The green at the left sides of the banner signifying new life allows us to remember the courtyard filled with guests. The movement in design influenced by the Book of Kells suggests joy at the wedding feast.