

Introduction:

Friends!

A couple of weeks ago we talked about “human rights,” the rights that every person has in the world. And I suggested that we basically have no rights, are entitled to nothing, and yet God gives us everything we need, blessing after blessing, and if there’s anything a person is entitled to, it’s the compassion and help of Christians, because we Christians are obligated to care for the world.

We talked, then, about human rights. And we’re talking today about human rites, too.

But a different kind. We’re talking about ceremony, about ritual, about the special events that shape human life, and how those work to help us make sense of the world around us.

So, I mean, look: I clearly thought it was clever to talk about “human rights, entitlements” and “human rites, ceremonies and rituals.” And I still think it’s clever, but more than clever, important: Because one of the basic ways we organize our lives is through the ceremonies that give our lives structure. We’ll talk about the big

rites we have, and the little ones, and the ways these fit together to shape us.

Today's message, more than most, asks us to simply think about what fills our days up. There's less asked of us to do; more asked of us to consider. So. That said, let's pray!

Prayer:

Ritual Basics: Human

Let me just get this out of the way: Ceremony, ritual, is incredibly basic to being a person. Humanity, wherever we've found ourselves, for as far back as history goes, has been organized around rituals and rites. You don't get people without special events.

But rituals aren't just one-off events, right? Rituals are those regular, special events that people have, which combine words and deeds in a powerfully symbolic way. They are meant to communicate powerfully something, and they matter, because they are invested with meaning for whoever takes part in them.

Ritual Basics: Religious & Relational

Religion--a word that we tend to throw under the bus,

but isn't a bad word--is built on rituals. And we throw religion under the bus because we often contrast it with relationship. We're the ones who have a relationship with God, right? Instead of just, you know, participants or looky-loos in some impersonal, ritual-based performance. But if religion is built on rituals, so are our relationships. From handshaking--which a little ritualized way to greet someone, a small ritual of extending peace to them--to marriage, which is a huge ritual in which we make enormous promises of commitment, our relationships are shaped by the rituals we take part in.

We call the little ones, sometimes, "niceties," minor details present in our social interactions that help our relationships flourish. The ritual of blessing someone when they sneeze, of holding a door open for someone, of trading "Your welcome" when we're told "Thank you." These are little rituals that support social relationships.

The larger ones we call covenants, although there aren't many in the world anymore. Marriage is a covenant, making oaths of loyalty and commitment to a nation, like people do when they become citizens, or to a military organization, like people do when they

become soldiers, are covenants. If we were to swear, or even affirm, “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,” with our hands on a Bible, that would be a covenantal moment. These days, the only real ritual left in most of the oaths we make in our society is when we give our signature to something, whether it’s a lease or loan or receipt, signing our name to something is the last little bit of ritual left for most of our oath-making in the world.

Ritual Basics: Human Community

And entrance to any human community is full of rituals: A terrible one is hazing, a ritual meant to shame a person, and position them for gratitude when the community accepts them. Maybe we teach the secret handshake of our made up club to the new kid in 4th grade. Or we’ve walked down to HR to get your access badge when you join a new company, and told the code to the printer that we have to keep secret.

These are rituals, rites--of entrance, of passage, of binding ourselves to another person or community. And they’re human.

Ritual Basics: Symbols

And something we have to keep in mind is that when

people break the rituals we keep, we humans are automatically, instinctually offended by it. Unless we've trained our hearts otherwise, or are really deeply resting on the Spirit's power, this is as true of Christians as it is anyone else. Because rituals, rites, are so basic to human life, they trigger our most basic emotions at their extremes, anger and joy in equal measure. There are few things more ritualistic in our world than professional sports, and we ourselves can have entire emotional life taken hostage by what happens in a football game as much as anyone.

This is all because, of course, rituals are symbols. They trigger deep beliefs about God, about ourselves, about others. They become shortcuts for relational virtues like commitment, faithfulness, integrity. And when our beliefs about commitment, faithfulness, and integrity are disrespected, it feels like we ourselves are being disrespected. When the symbols we've invested with power are rejected, it feels like we and our entire way of life are being rejected.

Those who are disrespectful, or irreverent, or improper--words that speak to the lack of honor that we believe ought to be directed toward some human rite--we feel like they're breaking some fundamental

good, and it's impossible not to be disgusted by it with a deeply personal disgust.

You can imagine anything. Spitting on someone's hand when they hold it out to shake. Making a scene at a funeral or a wedding or streaking at a graduation. I don't know. Sitting during the Pledge of Allegiance. Peeing in a baptismal pool. The sky's the limit when it comes to what we can imagine is disrespectful, irreverent, or improper, because each of us has some standard, much more of it shared than we realize, on what the right and good way to take part in rituals is. Our symbols are shared symbols, even though they don't all mean the same things to us, and our rituals are shared rituals, even though we don't always value them the same amount.

Making Sense Task:

And what I want us to really, really try pay attention to, when we find ourselves reacting negatively to something we see or hear about, is whether or not our reaction is because we believe some symbolic ritual is being treated badly. Are we reacting negatively to something we hear because a powerful symbolic ritual that we value is being treated in a way we can't stand.

Because, honestly, this is often the case. Ritual-breaking makes news. And we need to recognize the way our reaction to ritual-breaking is personal, instinctual, and unreflective. If we can recognize that, we can stop ourselves reacting. We can take just a beat to say “That thing they did strikes me as wrong. Why?” And then we can interact in a way with ourselves or another person that is, frankly, calmer, more productive, and positive.

Jesus?!?

Now. I haven’t talked about Jesus and following him at all yet, right? I hope someone noticed. This has all been just, you know, human nature stuff. What we deal with in the world, and what triggers us when we’re out and about, living.

But we have more than human nature. We have the Holy Spirit, and “just human nature” has never been an excuse we can call up.

You don’t get the Bible without ritual. Sometimes it’s treated incredibly positively. Jesus himself tells us to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I

have commanded you.” The Church’s basic charter has ritual, baptism, at its center. And, of course, it’s relational as much as it is religious, because all ritual is. The fact that humanity’s relationship with God has always been marked by covenants--promises God has made that have included symbolic rituals isn’t just a weird coincidence. It’s fundamental. And Jesus himself, at the Last Supper, established at what he called “a new covenant” a foundational ritual for those who trusted him, a ritual that’s so important that we give it a special name, the “Eucharist.” Communion.

And Paul is no stranger to ritual, either, even though we tend to think he is. In Acts 18 and 21 we see him taking up ritualistic vows in order to better spread the Gospel. He appeals to Caesar for a hearing in his defense, which was a legal ritual as solid and customary as putting our hand on our hearts for the Pledge of Allegiance.

Rituals Without Relationship:

What the New Testament does do, though, is lambast ritual for ritual’s sake. Some people would call these empty rituals. I want to call them rituals without relationship at their center.

Paul talks about empty rituals when he condemns those who make what he calls “worldly rules” about how to live. He says, “These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings.” Randomly flip open any page in any Gospel and you’ll probably find Jesus knocking down the importance of some ritual that the Pharisees have lifted up, and suggests that the best ritual is empty if it doesn’t include compassion, when he tells the Pharisees to go learn what God means when God says “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”

And in line with what we’ve already talked about, in Matthew’s Gospel, it actually isn’t until Jesus proves how little value the Pharisees’ Sabbath-keeping ritual is that they decide to kill him. He heals someone in need, “does good” as he puts it, by saving someone, and they’re outraged that he’s not respecting the ritual of sabbath-keeping. And of course, Sabbath-keeping wasn’t just a rite, a ritualized weekly ceremony, it was a symbol. A symbol of the Pharisees’ way of life, the best example of the the whole “yoke and burden,” the ritualized life, that they called their followers to.

Our Ritualized Life: Years and Weeks

We have a ritualized life. The Christian life is marked by rituals. We have special ones, from Dedications or Baptisms, to Communion and Marriages, Anointings and Funerals. We have our regular gathering on The Lord's Day. We have greater seasons built around days whose acknowledgement and reverence has become a ritual: Easter and Easter Season, Advent and the Twelve Days of Christmas, and Epiphany and Lent. We just passed All Saints Day, which most of the Church in the world recognized. Our holidays are holy days, days that are meant to be symbolic, full of the reality that, in some real ways, just living is a Christian ritual. There is, if we drew on it, an entire structure for all of human life that the Church has built up. And for many millions of people, there's nothing empty about any of it, because Jesus and people God loves are at the heart of it all.

And we gather weekly on Sunday, "The Lord's Day," the first day of the week that reminds us of Resurrection Sunday, the first day of the renewing of the world. The author of Hebrews reminds us to not give up "meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another" And meeting together, like most rituals, reminds us of who we are

and why we live, has symbolic power, and skipping it too often can cause us to, oh, “lose the faith and wander away.” We gather outside Sunday, some of us. Some of us fast regularly. Some of us take moments of devotion daily, reading Scripture, praying.

And look, these daily things, these are what I want to begin to end on today.

These large rituals, these great rites, are so important. Their symbolic power re-centers on our relationship with God and ourselves and one another and others. They remind us why we live and what we live for. They become our markers of time, our annual and weekly calendars. They measure out our lives, and could do far more if we wanted them too, because Christianity is full of as many rituals as we want.

But anytime we depend on a ritual, we’re also inviting frustration against those who don’t respect it the way we think they ought. Just wait until Christmas, and the rage about not being told “Merry Christmas” comes up, right?

Our Ritualized Life: Days

Because if our Christian weeks and years are

measured out in ritual, so are our days. And we can't ignore the very small rituals that make up every day we have, their capacity to shape us, and the way we use them to make sense of the world around us.

We call our daily rituals routines. They aren't that symbolic, taken by themselves. We don't invest too much meaning in brushing our teeth, maybe. But we do invest a little bit: I'm a person who takes care of myself. We invest more in the chores we do, maybe: I'm a person who makes dinner for my family. Our daily routine is actually full of very small little rituals that we do, which taken together are incredibly powerful for us. We wake up, and turn on the news. Which news we turn on, why we turn it on, what that station means for us, and how we identify as people who listen to this news station, not that one, are meaningful. Where do we buy our daily cup of coffee? Or what brand of coffee do we make? Or are we tea drinkers, and our day never starts without it? When we come home from work or school, what do we do?

We can't neglect the very small rituals that make up every day we have. For all of us, when our routine is disrupted--because of illness or accident or misunderstanding or whatever--we react. Sometimes

we'll react more strongly to our routine being disrupted than we will to some great ritual. I mean, go back in time to when you had to watch a TV show on a certain day; If I missed Hanging With Mr. Cooper I was angry at God, and I didn't know anything about Him, wasn't even a Christian. An inconvenience or a hassle is really just a word we use to label the disruption of our daily rituals.

Aside: Compassion

And you know, we should have such great compassion on those who are so desperately poor or displaced or in trouble that they don't even have the privilege of a routine to begin with. We should treat with care, and offer extra prayers, for those of us who, because of illness or accident, are having our daily rituals, our routine, disrupted. Because it is a disruption to the things that make us *us*, no matter how flexible we are our quickly we adapt.

The trouble is that what makes the news--and this is as true of "Christian news" as it is any news--are the outliers. Our world teaches us to praise and attend to what's atypical, not what's typical, what's glamorous, not what's tedious. We hear Paul say "make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own

business and work with your hands,” and we nod, and turn on movies about superheroes. Whatever we find boring, whatever is regular to us, isn’t compelling.

But it is in our boring, routine, tedious, quiet, typical lives that we prove our faithfulness and make or break our goals, especially the goal of becoming more like Jesus, changing for the better. And I could sell this as training for some great moment, a moment of fame or heroism, right? Mother Theresa only got famous after decades of boring faithfulness, a body guard only throws him or herself in front of a bullet after years of training to reject instinct. People run toward a fire to help someone instead of away from it in fear because they’ve trained themselves for empathy. Heroism and the spotlight, when it comes to these things, are symptoms, side-effects of years of boring, routine, tedious, quiet practice.

But what if there is no chance to be heroic? What if there is no great moment, and the mark we leave in the world, the life we leave behind us when we pass away, is in the end not an outlier at all? There is no TED talk on how to make no splash. What if Mother Theresa had just died one day, unknown to us and the world. Would that have lessened, in God’s eyes, her

worth?

God does not value celebrity and limelight; God values faithfulness. God doesn't value impact and effectiveness, God values obedience. Do celebrity, impact, limelight, effectiveness come from obedience and faithfulness: Utterly. In God's Kingdom they come from nowhere else. But again, when we take our eyes off our standard of good, the one whom we're supposed to become like, Jesus, then it's almost certain that we've taken our eyes off the things Jesus values as well.

Bringing Together: Rituals

And here's how I want to bring this together for us, to help us make sense of what's going on around us.

If we are neglectful of our daily rituals, I believe that in some real way we'll be neglecting . For those of us who have power to

We people are made by ritual. The rituals and rites we keep are the ones that shape us. And this is true of the small set of daily rituals we have as well as the larger ones. Before we're reminded to regularly gather together, and regularly celebrate the Eucharist, we're

called to pray continually. Our lives are meant to be shaped by daily rituals that gather in between the spaces of the weekly and yearly ones, all of them reminders of the relationship we're meant to have with God, each other, strangers, and ourselves.

Bringing Together: But...

But it is so, so hard for us to create and maintain daily routines that reinforce our faith. I could be wrong, but I think it's more difficult than it has ever been for many of us to feel in control of our lives. We're caring for sick parents and grandparents or we are the sick parents and grandparents; we're caring for children with many needs, or asking, as children, that our parents help us care for the many needs we have.

When you combine the the stages of life we in this room are in with the society outside these walls that continually presses in on us for our loyalty and attention, it can be incredibly incredibly hard to find any routine at all.

But, honestly, we have them. We do have them. It's how we survive at all. The little things we do, regularly, daily, that together over time make up our life.

And I want us to realize that it's in our daily rituals where our faith is built, where we connect God with the regular stuff we're doing. But it's also in our daily rituals where we invite the most faithless voices to speak to us.

Our daily rituals matter. Our routines have enough space in them for a prayer of gratitude, for a deep breath, for a question "God, what should I do right now?"

And I know our resources are low, our obligations are high, but if we can connect our daily rituals to God, we'll be unbeatable, no matter what comes our way. Frankly, we won't need to make sense of much, because life will already make sense for us. We'll be walking with God in the middle of whatever we do with ourselves.

Conclusion:

Do God a favor, me a favor, everyone a favor. Try to

notice some of the boring things you do every day, but do every day: turn on the news at that time, take meds at that moment, put a load of laundry in, feed the pets, whatever it is.

And consider how this little ritual can connect you with God. Maybe you turn off the news instead of turning it on, or watch another station. Maybe you take a moment to give your pet some pets, instead of dumping the food and rushing out the door. Maybe you invite someone into the process of getting dinner ready, or folding laundry, maybe you don't put your headphones on, but leave them off in case someone wants to talk.

All I know is that we are made or unmade in the little things we do everyday, because it is those little things, connected to God or separated from Him, that create closeness or distance between us and God.

And those big huge rituals that carry us through life and carry us through the years, when they arrive embrace them. But watch out, because we invest them with enormous importance and meaning, and much of our anger and frustration with people often has to do with the ways they don't value our favorite

rituals as much as we think they should. We have to decide if we can disagree about how important something is or how valuable something is, and still show someone love. That inclination, though? It's shaped as our relationship with God deepens in our daily routines.

Let's watch ourselves, seeing what God already sees, and figure out ways our routines can draw us toward Him, instead of creating distance.