

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost • September 2, 2018

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9 • Psalm 15 • James 1:17-27 • Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

A few months ago, *The Atlantic* ran a story about a new Silicon Valley think tank called Ritual Design Lab.¹ Ritual Design Lab's elevator pitch is that people have a deep desire to perform rituals that create meaning in their lives, but the rituals that the church, their communities, and their families have historically provided feel too impersonal and sterile. So send in some basic info about yourself, likes and dislikes, and any spiritual persuasions you have, and a group of "ritual designers" will come up with a new ritual for you to perform, complete with a set of foolproof instructions for you and your friends. A combination of vague spirituality, a BuzzFeed personality quiz, and a choose-your-own-adventure novel.

Even its founders admit that the rituals feel a little bit artificial, but they also seem to capture the zeitgeist of our moment. Rituals are whatever you need them to be. Arguing about how to do rituals correctly, like Jesus and the Pharisees do in today's gospel reading, probably strikes most of us as judgy or, at the very least, narrow minded. There's no right or wrong way to perform a ritual. You perform a ritual the right way if it works for you.

But the reality isn't that we've moved beyond rituals. If anything, it's the exact opposite. We're so dependent on rituals and the way they provide meaning in our lives that we don't even notice them until something unusual happens. Consider that one of the biggest news stories of last year, the controversy we seemed to have an insatiable appetite for, was whether football players should kneel in protest during the national anthem. We had an argument that launched the hottest of takes and the most half-baked of op-eds, and stretched from the highest office in the land all the way to at least one receiving line at Vander Platt Funeral Home.² We told ourselves we were having a debate about patriotism and race and conscience and freedom of speech. But that's not really what we were arguing about. We were really having an argument about ritual. We were really having an argument about how we perform this public liturgy.

So instead of arguing over the right way to do the ritual, we should have started with a much more basic question, the same one Luther used to frame his Small Catechism, which is *What does this mean?* Or, in this case, *What are we doing when we perform this ritual?* And *What is the ritual doing to us?* For some of us, we sing the national anthem as a way of honoring members of the military. For others of us, it's a reminder of our nation's failure to live up to its self-professed ideals. And for others of us, it's a way of aspiring to the better angels of our nature. No wonder we can't agree on how to do the ritual correctly when we can't even agree on why we're doing the ritual in the first place.

Now, I'm not going to try to convince you one of those interpretations is better than the others. It's just to say that for a people who claim not to care about rituals, we spend an

¹ Sigal Samuel, "A Design Lab Is Making Rituals for Secular People," *The Atlantic*, May 7, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/05/ritual-design-lab-secular-atheist/559535/>.

² "Statement by the President," *The White House*, accessed August 27, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-by-the-president-2/>.

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

awful lot of time arguing about them. So perhaps today's seemingly irrelevant argument about rituals between Jesus and the Pharisees has more to tell us than we'd like to think.

The particular ritual that Jesus and the Pharisees are arguing over is called "the tradition of the elders." Just a little bit of context here. In the Israelite tradition, God brought the Israelites out of slavery and invited them into this new covenant relationship. And at the heart of that relationship is the Torah, or the law. And the law exists to order your life around God instead of ordering it around Pharaoh like you did in Egypt. So Torah, we Christians often forget, is a gift. It's good. It's good because it reminds you of your relationship with God and helps you stay in that covenant relationship.

The "tradition of the elders" is something else. It was another level of guidelines on behavior put up around the Torah to make sure that you stayed within the bounds of Jewish law.³ Some Jewish writers described it as a fence to make sure you didn't get too close to breaking the rules. So unlike the Torah, which was created by God, the tradition of the elders was a set of rules created by people. It applied, best we know, to some priests. And some Pharisees opted into it, too. So if you were a Jew like Jesus and the disciples, you lived under the Torah. But you didn't need to adhere to this additional set of rules.

So the Pharisees' question, "Why do your disciples not live according of the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" is a loaded one. Because they're really not asking that question in good faith. They're not actually interested in the answer. What they're really trying to do is point to themselves, to how they go above and beyond what they need to, how they are the holiest of the holy people.

Now this may all seem like an arcane argument over Jewish laws. But the key to understanding this argument, is the difference in how these two different traditions motivate your behavior. The Torah invites you to faith in God and God's covenant with you. The motivation for living by the Torah is that it reminds you of how God brought your people out of slavery and how your community's relationship with God is the most fundamental thing about you. So living by the Torah is all about gratitude.

The motivation for living by the tradition of the elders, this human invention, is something else. It's shame. The motivation to meticulously wash your hands and your dishes and your kettles and your pots and pans isn't to remind you of God's love for you. It's to prove that you are holy enough for other people's approval. To prove that you are committed enough to get close to God. When the Pharisees ask why Jesus's disciples ignore the tradition of the elders, what they're really doing is pointing out their own piety. Trying to shame other people into following their rules which, remember, God hasn't asked the people to keep.

Now, few of us have arguments over whether to adhere to the tradition of the elders. But that contrast between being motivated by shame and motivated by gratitude is one that we all live with. There's a reason why people try to motivate people using shame. Because it strikes right at the heart of what we're most afraid of: that we're not worthy of love. When Jim Knol was here last spring, one of the things he talked about was the difference between

³ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 208.

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

guilt and shame. Guilt is about feeling bad about a thing you did. You cut someone off on the Parkway. You made an ill-timed joke. You jumped the line at Market Basket.

Shame is much deeper than that. Because shame is about feeling bad about who you are as a person. Shame is that little voice that creeps into your head telling you you're not good enough. Not because you did something wrong, but because your very being as a person is wrong. And there's no shortage of people who are willing to exploit that self-doubt to try to puff up their own egos. Who will tell you that the way to feel better about yourself is to adopt their rules for living. Or to adopt their lifestyle. Or to adopt their rituals. And what happens when we're motivated by shame? It never fixes the problem. Getting shamed into doing something never brings us to acceptance because there's always that doubt that you didn't do it the right way. Or that you're an impostor. Or that you're going to be found out. Or that you've been swindled.

The opposite of being motivated by shame is being motivated by gratitude. What's the difference? When we do something out of shame, we're focused on ourselves. Even when we're shamed into pursuing a noble cause, we're really not thinking about the "orphans and widows in their distress." We're thinking about how we're being perceived by other people. Whether we've earned their respect or not. Gratitude calls us out of that cycle of shame and reorients us toward God and our neighbors. Today's reading from James puts it this way, "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above." Jesus empowers us to trust God's promise that we're loved so that we can love other people the same way God loves them. Loving other people with the same love God has given us instead of from the fear that we're not good enough.

So what does all this have to do with ritual? Well think about the central rituals of the church. Bath, word, and table. These are all rituals that we enact together, but they are primarily rituals in which God does something. In baptism, God grafts us into the body of Christ. In word, God's promises to us are proclaimed. And in communion, God's future becomes our present. We often forget that our weekly liturgy, the rituals we do here every week, are not just metaphors to describe the world. They are actually intended to change the world. They are one of the ways in which God's work gets done.

And one of the ways they change the world is by calling us out of our shame and enabling us to live lives of gratitude. Calling us out of the cycles of shame and guilt that we get trapped in, and transforming our lives into lives of service. Not because we need to prove our dignity or our worth to other people. But because, in Jesus, the perfect gift of God's love has been given to us for the sake of others.

So what does this mean? It means that in the liturgy we become who God says we are. Fed and forgiven. Sacramental and sent. Made whole and made holy for the life of the world.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor