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# Rituals That Help and Hinder

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A Sermon By  
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Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon is available at*  
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/2015-08-30-AAA.mp3>

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

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The Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
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I recently returned from two wonderful weeks of vacation. The first week of vacation, I flew to Lawrence, KS to visit Stephanie, one of my best friends from seminary. Stephanie and her husband have two young children, Coraline who just turned one last week, and three and a half year old Henry. Both Henry and Cora are wonderful kids. They're loving, engaging, playful... and they both love to be read to. One of my favorite parts of my trip was cuddling up with Henry on an overstuffed armchair and delving into a good storybook.

Henry loved this activity too. He and I would finish one quirky story and he would rapidly thrust another well-worn book into my hands. This quickly became a habit during my stay. My first two days there, we would read together mostly in the morning and afternoons. By my third day in Lawrence, Henry wanted me to read him his bedtime story. When that evening came and it was time for Henry to go to bed, I went to his bedroom and he handed me a copy of "Guess How Much I Love You." I read it, appropriately acting out the arm motions and intoning each character's voice just so. After I finished the story, I kissed Henry goodnight and his parents came in to tuck him in.

The next evening Henry again wanted me to read him his bedtime story. I happily agreed and he handed me "Guess How Much I Love You." I informed him that we read that story last night and wouldn't he like a different story. He was very adamant that this was the story he wanted. So I read it, kissed him goodnight, and his parents tucked him in. The same thing happen the next night, and the next. After reading "Guess How Much I Love You" for the fourth night in a row I finally asked Stephanie, why Henry wanted that specific book each night. "It's part of his ritual," she said.

Ritual is essential in life for everyone from 3 and ½ year olds, to 93 and ½ year olds. As human begins, we are wired for ritual. National, religious or familial, rituals offer us the comfort of repetition and familiarity as they lend beauty to occurrences that otherwise might be considered mundane. All of us have rituals that we remember and treasure. Some are simple habits; others are beloved and precious because they are tied to memories of love and affection from our earliest years; some, like the Eucharist, are holy. Those that are mere habits like reading "Guess How Much I Love You" before bed may easily be forgotten or ignored. But rituals that are indeed enveloped in memories of love or sacredness, like the Eucharist, are indispensable. They're beautiful and meaningful.

Ritual takes center stage in our scripture passages today. In our first reading from Deuteronomy, we glimpse the Hebrew people on the cusp of entering the Promised Land. But before they enter this new and much desired destination, Moses charges them to obey the commandments of the

LORD and to live their lives according to God's Law so that they may be a great nation, worthy of their identity as God's chosen people. In this passage we hear Moses' insistence on the importance of the Law and the covenant relationship it represents between God and God's people. As the people establish themselves in the land, they follow Moses' charge and keep God's Law as best they can. And, as human beings tend to ritualize life in order to make sense of it and to give meaning to their experiences, the Israelites began to ritualize God's Law.

Now, fast-forward about five hundred years to today's scene from Mark's gospel, in which the religious leaders from Jerusalem confront Jesus and his followers about their apparent lack of keeping tradition and defying ritual by not washing their hands before eating. The Law deemed only certain foods appropriate to eat. These foods were to be prepared in a certain way and consumed in a certain way. In this specific instance it appeared that Jesus and his followers did not adhere to the tradition that Moses imparted and charged the people of God to follow. This baffled the religious leaders. If Jesus was a man of God, how could he so easily disregard the Law of God?

Jesus, seeing their concern, sought to explain that staying true to the ritual was not of paramount importance to God. Rather, what matters most to God is that God's people stay true to the intention behind the ritual. In this case, the cleanliness of the food isn't Jesus' primary concern in the grand scheme of things. He points out that what goes inside the mouth, inside the body from the outside will not harm the soul. What emerges from the heart to find utterance in the mouth is what truly has potential to harm.

In his response Jesus puts ritual in its place. As he always did, Jesus looked beyond the obvious, beyond the religious habit, to zero in on what lies in the heart. And he didn't mince words. In fact, Jesus' words were harsh; "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." Jesus turned the religious leaders' interpretation of the scriptures upside down and he asked them to think of what was most important – the ritual of washing or the feeding of those who were hungry. Is compassion more important than ritual? What matters most to God? What matters most to us? Doing the will of God or holding on to traditions?

It's important to point out that doing the will of God and tradition are not always opposed to one another. In fact, ritual tradition has the power to draw us closer to God. Our own Episcopal tradition is full of rich language and imagery. Our liturgy empowers us to meet God through scripture, community, and sacrament. It is sacred and at its best, it strengthens us to live Christ-centered lives.

That being said, the church has had a history of making ritual so paramount that in the Middle Ages even salvation was bought and sold through ritualistic practices. Instead of religious rituals, rituals of injustice were established in the church. In this way, ritual became an idol and a distraction to true relationship of God. When tradition or practices cause us to lose touch with God's heart, it's time to reevaluate them. I believe that's the message Jesus imparts to us in our Gospel lesson today.

When reading today's lessons for the first time a question stuck with me. To what in my life would Jesus point and say, "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition?" Are there practices or actions in my life that I've become too focused on, to the point that they hinder

rather than help my relationship with God? Jesus' words today are challenging, but they are words that we need to hear. Which rituals bring you closer to God? Which rituals hinder your relationship with God? What new practices could bring you life and growth in Christ?

May God who created in us a desire for ritual, Christ who encouraged true ritual, and the Holy Spirit who inspires new rituals empower you to delve into these questions. Amen.