

First Christian Church

(Disciples of Christ)
210 North Fifth Street
Ponca City, Oklahoma

The 13th Sunday after Pentecost
August 30, 2009

Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9
James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
the Rev. Larry B Metzger, pastor



A teacher watched a boy entering her classroom with dirty hands. She stopped him and said, “Please wash your hands. My goodness, what would you say if I came into the room with hands like that?”

With a smile the boy replied, “I think I’d be too polite to mention it.”

Well, on this one day some Pharisees placed the tradition above politeness.

Some of the communions of Christianity have much ritual and others do not have much *apparent* ritual. I say apparent, because ritual is everywhere, in all traditions, even among the Quakers.

Just the mention of the word is often frowned upon by the less liturgical traditions.

Yet ritual is a way of life for some. Take a princess or a prince. They live and die with pomp and circumstance. Tomorrow marks the 12th anniversary of the death of Princess Diana. Do you remember the response of the world? Within hours of the tragedy flowers began piling up at the Kensington Palace. People stood for hours in lines waiting at the British embassies around the world to sign remembrance books and to add their own thoughts.

A protocol, code of etiquette was that the Union Jack, the British flag, was never flown at Buckingham Palace. For the first time ever, the Union Jack flew at half-mast at Buckingham Palace.

It is estimated that up to two billion people watched the memorial services around the globe. BBC television transmitted

the funeral worldwide with BBC radio broadcasting the audio in forty-four languages. (Les T. Csorba, *Trust the One Thing That Makes or Breaks a Leader* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), pp. 171-172.7)

Many of the viewers and listeners are the same people who would say ritual and tradition are not important.

In Tony Campolo's book *Who Switched the Price Tags*, Campolo says that as an evangelical Baptist teacher and preacher, one of the most serious errors he made was to underestimate the value of ritual and tradition.

From his studies of the famous French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, Campolo discovered how essential and vital "ritual is for the health and maintenance of any social institution." Studies have shown, for example, "that in the absence of consistent ritual, families tend to fall apart morally and psychologically." (Word, Inc., 1986, p. 145. From a sermon by Rev. Eric S. Ritz.)

Traditions are not God created things, they are human inventions. But because they are of human creation does not mean they are not important, because they are important.

Think for a moment of your traditions, your rituals. We all have rituals and when those rituals are interrupted or missed, it upsets the day or the week.

The rodeo, the Marland Mansion, Iris Festival are all traditions. How about moving the Pioneer Woman to Stillwater or tear down the Hutchinson Auditorium. Or stop the firemen from raising funds at intersections; or suggest the military become smoke-free and see what reaction one gets.

One of the hardest things for a person to do is quit smoking. Yes, smoking is a habit (also an addiction) but it is also part of a ritual. Many, many smokers will get up in the morning and the first thing they do is get a cup of coffee or some I have known will get a coke, and then light a cigarette.

You see smoking is the habit, but the ritual is getting a cup of coffee and lighting a cigarette. If one can modify the ritual, replace something, add something, and then it becomes easier to break the habit.

Often the rituals are established for good reasons. Washing the hands before a meal makes good sense. If you have dirty hands or infected hands, then the food that is eaten will carry the infection

inside the body. Washing hands before a meal makes reasonable sense.

After going to the bathroom it also makes sense to wash one's hands. We are taught this as children. Both of these practices are rituals proscribed by Jewish law. Not so unusual are they?

There are several rituals involving hand washing, one calls for washing the hands following a meal. This was to keep one from infecting the eye by rubbing it.

The rituals were not an issue with Jesus. He did not oppose rituals, ceremonies or traditions. What he was objecting to was substituting rituals for authentic religion. Ceremonies and rituals are to help move us to acts of mercy and compassion not to be substitutes for them.

The letter of James reminds us that the Christian must do more than simply hear the word. To simply participate in a ritual without following through with the purpose of that ritual is empty and thus becomes purposeless.

It is like looking into a mirror. See the face, the eyes, the hair, the build. Then walk away and you cannot tell the color of your hair, the eyes.

If you hear the word, you must take it with you. Remember it. Act on it. James goes on in the next chapter to say, "Faith without works is dead faith."

We must do something about what we have come to know as the Christian walk.

The Pharisees and teachers of the Law made a rule. The rule was called Corban. It held that when a gift was devoted to God, it couldn't be rescinded. That money or gift is Corban. It has been devoted to God. That's a good thing. But then tragedy strikes and your parents need financial help. Which is greater, Moses' Commandment to honor your parents or a pledge made to the synagogue.

The Pharisees got into trouble because they used their Corban rule to lock people into gifts they could not keep when trouble came. That's not love that's law.

James refers us to the law of liberty, one that does not constrain us, but helps us fulfill the word implanted in us. If not careful, rigid devotion can kill compassion.

According to the fossil record, the oldest known mammal on earth is the opossum. This is unusual, because the opossum is not a particularly hardy animal. It is not very fast or smart or aggressive, and it has few ways to defend itself. So how has the opossum survived so well in this hostile world?

For starters, the opossum will eat anything. There is almost no substance that it finds inedible. Also, the opossum is not susceptible to any diseases. It even has a built-in resistance to certain types of snake venom. But the single most effective defense mechanism opossums possess is the ability to “play dead.”

When threatened by a predator, opossums react by falling into a coma-like state, which can last up to six hours. Most wild animals will not eat a dead animal, so the predator often leaves the opossum alone. (By the Bathroom Readers' Institute. Uncle John's Ahh-Inspiring Bathroom Reader (Ashland, OR: Bathroom Readers' Press, 2002), pp.77-78)

Playing opossum is pretending to be something one is not. If one's participation in the ritual or tradition stops there, then they are “playing opossum” and it is no longer authentic.

James says: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God... is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

To the extent ritual and tradition encourage and promote pure and undefiled faith, then pour it on. When one uses it as a substitute, then it serves no real purpose.

So let our recitation of the Lord's prayer, our singing of hymns, even our Fellowship Meals move us to care for others and love as Christ has loved us.

