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Life-Giving Rituals
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

A keynote speaker for a conference on “vital churches” tells of an experience with clergy and laity who attended that conference. The focus of the seminar was for the purpose of discussing how congregations might find new ways of being faithful in a changing world. The day opened with a chaplain taking the group through a spiritual exercise of centering prayer. She wanted everyone to look around the room one last time before turning the lights down. She then asked everyone to close their eyes. The participants were encouraged to be conscious of their breathing and the connection between their feet and the floor. God would give each person a sacred word to meditate on, she said, as they breathed in and out.

Deeply believing in centering prayer herself, but having difficulty connecting the group exercise to critical issues for the church today, the only word that kept coming to her was “anxiety.” She tried to banish that word and reach out for “holy blessedness,” but only anxiety remained.

She thought to herself, “Where is this anxiety coming from?” And then, she realized the irony. “Isn’t this the epitome of church leaders in dying congregations—sitting around in a dark room with their eyes closed?” Her eyes popped open refusing to shut and her thoughts continued: “People need to open their eyes and see what is going on around them.” Later, confessing to a different audience she said: “I have little patience for spirituality that seems self-absorbed and isolating. Most of my life has been a search for authentic spiritual community, a church with its eyes wide [open] to the world, nothing phony or contrived.”¹

Some Pharisees and religious scholars came from Jerusalem to hear the teaching of Jesus. They noticed Jesus and his disciples not observing a religious practice of many Jewish leaders—that of thoroughly washing their hands

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us* (New York, HarperCollins: 2006), 1-2.

especially after being in the market place, nor scrubbing pots and jugs as a spiritual ritual of cleansing oneself before taking into their bodies food—God’s provisions for them. They asked Jesus why he did not follow these rules and treated them with complete disregard.

Jesus responded to their question by quoting the prophet Isaiah: “You say one thing but do another; you live from words rather than your heart; you abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

A quick once-over of Mark’s text for today would quickly lead us to the sole conclusion that our religious rituals often take the place of ethics...that the symbolisms of our worship and beliefs get in the way of living from out of our hearts. As powerful as all of this is, if we stay at that level, we miss the deeper teaching about hypocrisy that Jesus provides.

Hypocrisy refers to the disconnect between our inner moral values that we talk about and those that we actually practice. It is a disconnect between our soul’s center and the outward way we live. We all live, and struggle, against that inconsistency. Personal integrity has to do with bringing harmony to the inner being so that what we think and feel and say and do are consistent with each other. The Apostle Paul struggled with this:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...I can will what is right, but I cannot do it...For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. (Romans 7:15, 18-19)

Jesus brought a sense of aliveness to his followers. He confounded those who worked hard at the discipline of rituals. And, he called all who followed to discover the real self within. If you are inclined toward rituals, let me offer four this morning.

Lead from the heart, not out of fear. When faced with new opportunities, you can always come up with many reasons to say “no,” many reasons why something new won’t work. Often our negative inclinations are tied to our fears. Never say “no” to an opportunity unless you have a legitimate reason, always remembering that “no” can be very appropriate.

My mother has been positively enduring life for the past year and a half. After two strokes in 2008, her days are far from what they have been throughout her past. I decided earlier this week that at her death and in her memory I would

read for all of us who gather a children's book she read as a mother and kindergarten teacher hundreds of times—*The Little Engine that Could*. Each time I heard her read the words spoken by “the little engine” as he tried again to carry his load up and over the mountain the air was filled with her optimism: “I think I can, I think I can, I think I can.” Sometimes when questioning possibilities as a child and teenager my mom would offer those words out of the blue.

At yesterday's Mass for Senator Edward Kennedy, his son, Ted Jr. was one of the person's who spoke. Ted Jr. was twelve-years and recovering from bone cancer and the loss of one of his legs. On a winter day, his father grabbed a sled and said, “Let's go up the hill.”

“I'm afraid,” Ted Jr. shot back. “I can't do this.”

“You can do it,” his father responded. “We'll climb to the top if it takes all day long!”

When we make decisions out of fear we are looking only at what can go wrong rather than what can go right. Our fears limit our vision, restrict our confidence, and drain our energy.

A second life-giving ritual to practice is that of keeping your eyes open. Life is happening all around us. Opportunities to inject hope and energy are ever before us. At the end of the opening chapter of the Mark's gospel, Jesus is teaching in the surrounding area of Capernaum on the north side of the Sea of Galilee. A man with leprosy approached him. “If you choose, you can make me clean. Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Far more is contained in those two verses than meets the eye. To touch the leper meant ritualistically that Jesus would become unclean and defiled and unable to enter the temple in Jerusalem. With eyes wide open and fully aware of the consequence as well as possibilities, Jesus saw the opportunity to make a difference in someone's life. So can we.

A third life-giving ritual I encourage you to practice is to turn loose the things that hold you back. Life is made up of many principles. One of them goes like this: “If you want this, you can't have that.” It is a principle of delayed gratification; it is a principle of discipline. It recognizes the importance of making choices that necessarily eliminates other choices. If you want to make good grades, you can't spend all your time with your friends. If you want to

keep your body healthy, you can't eat everything you want. If you want to get ahead in your career, you can't settle for mediocrity. If you want to deepen your spiritual life, you can't count on someone else to make it happen for you.

Our youngest son, Ty, is on his last two days of a two and a half week trip down the Colorado River running through the Grand Canyon. Eleven years ago, he had taken three years off from college in the School of Landscape Design and Environment. Ty was in Colorado working as a white-water guide in the summer, a snowmobile guide in the winter, and waiting tables in between seasons. Scheduled to re-enter the University of Georgia and finish the last three years of a five-year degree, we got a phone call. "Dad, I've got a chance to go on a trip through the Grand Canyon. There's a seventeen-year waiting list to get a group permit. Someone's dropped out and offered me his place." After fifteen minutes of disciplined conversation on my part I finally said to him, "I'm glad you've been offered the opportunity, but you're all set with classes and an apartment in Athens, Georgia. Ty, if you want this, you can't have that. Maybe another opportunity will come along. Maybe not. But you've got to choose one or the other. You can't have both. Which is most important in the long run?" I'm glad that twelve years later he is completing another life-time goal he passed up to complete his degree.

A fourth life-giving ritual I would encourage is to embrace your authentic self. You are made uniquely in the image of God. You are different from everyone else in the world. When Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment, he began reciting part of the *Shema*, the Jewish morning and evening prayer: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Mark 12:30-31). In order for us to love others, we must first be able to love ourselves—embrace the wonderful person God has created us to be and discover all that is wrapped up in this unique body, mind, and spirit of ours.

The Legend of Bagger Vance was one of those classic movies, directed by Robert Redford. The storyline is about a promising young man, a promising young golfer, whose life was interrupted by service in the military during World

War I. After a traumatizing experience, Rannulph Junah returns to Georgia living a shadowy life. Through a weird turn of events Junah has the opportunity to play in an exhibition game with the great Bobby Jones and Walter Hagen. Junah's life has been a wreck, his relationships have all gone sour, and he hasn't played golf in several years. Mysteriously, a traveler in the night—Bagger Vance—comes upon Junah hitting golf balls in the dim glow of the early evening and offers to serve as his caddy.

Bagger Vance is more than a happen-stance caddy. He is a spiritual guide, a traveling angel, trying to help Junah get his life back together. Several poignant conversations take place during those three days and 72-holes of golf. This monologue of Bagger Vance was one of the first as Junah struggled for confidence not to give up:

Put your eyes on Bobby Jones. Look at his practice swing...almost like he's searchin' for something. Then he finds it. Watch how he settle hisself right into the middle of it.

Feel that focus. He got a lot of shots he could choose from—duffs and tops and skulls. There's only ONE shot that's in perfect harmony with him. One shot that's his authentic shot, and that shot is gonna choose him.

There's a perfect shot out there tryin' to find each and every one of us. All we got to do is get ourselves out of its way, to let it choose us. Can't see that flag as some dragon you got to slay. You got to look with soft eyes. See the place where the tides and the seasons and the turnin' of the Earth, all come together...where everything that is...becomes one. You got to seek that place with your soul Junuh. Seek it with your hands. Don't think about it. Feel it. Your hands is wiser than your head ever gonna be.

Now I can't take you there Junuh. Just hopes I can help you find a way. Just you...that ball...that flag...and all you are.

All you are. That 's what God wants from each of us. Not all of the "shouldas" and "couldas" and "wouldas," but our true, authentic selves right where we are this day so that we can become one life-giving ritual. Well?

Song of Solomon 2:8-13

8The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. 9My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. 10My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; 11for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. 12The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. 13The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away."

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

1Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, 2they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. 3(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 4and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) 5So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" 6He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; 7in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' 8You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

14Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 15there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

21"For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, 22adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. 23All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."