

Habits of the Heart

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Flower Communion
29 May 2016

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Anything worth doing once is worth doing again.
At least that's one version of the old proverb.

But is everything worthwhile worth repeating?
Is everything worth doing, actually worth doing again?

I'm not so sure.

Some things aren't, after all, meant to be repeated.
There are truly singular experiences to be had in this life.
Things we are meant to do once, and only once.

Of course, there are countless things we repeat.
Things we return to over and over again.

But we need to ask ourselves, "Why?"
At least from time to time.

We need to give thought to why we do certain things repeatedly.

Is it out of habit, or out of obligation?

Do we do things over and over by design,
or without thinking about it at all?

Are we upholding some supposedly sacred tradition,
or trying to keep something going that feels like a terrible burden?

Are we slaves to habits that aren't helpful,
or do we come back to touchstone moments and activities
seeking some deeper meaning and sense of connection?

It's worth asking ourselves these questions
because what we do habitually eventually comes to define us.

As Annie Dillard puts it:
“How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.”

For better and for worse, we are our habits.

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So what are the habits that give shape to who you are?

And are these habits pulling you toward life, or pulling you away?

Do they lead you to feeling better connected with the world around you,
or do they drive you away from what you most cherish?

Do they help you to become more the person you seek to be,
or do they undermine your best efforts
to live a life of integrity and purpose?

Now, the questions that can be asked about our habits
can just as easily be asked about the rituals in our lives.
And should be.

Do our rituals draw us toward life and connection
and all we seek to be in this world?

Or do they draw us away from life,
or worse, lead us to no place in particular?

Now, it may be useful at this point to consider
a working definition of “ritual,”
and ask what makes a ritual different from a habit.

A habit is simply something, some action, some practice,
that we do with some frequency.

It's part of our routine—
so much so that we usually don't think much about it,

if we think about it at all.

We cook oatmeal every morning, and we brush our teeth.
We watch a favourite show in the evening,
or text our best friend just before turning out the light at night.

Some habits are good, and some are not.
Some help us to be happy, productive people.
And others don't.

Habits are just the things we do over and over, without much thought.

Ritual, however, is something we do with great intention.
It's something we're supposed to think about.
And it's something we're meant to do, well, religiously.

That is, we do it seeking connection.

We do it out of a desire to find deeper meaning,
to be reminded of our life's larger purpose.

We do it to be called back to being our best selves.

We take up rituals,
with some measure of reverence and respect,
to heal what is broken,
to celebrate what is most wondrous,
to feel gratitude for life's gifts.

Rituals are things we do on purpose, with purpose.

In a spiritual sense, rituals are the things we do
to connect and reconnect ourselves to life.

They are about having an experience that opens our hearts.
That helps us to see things differently.
That gives us strength or courage or hope.

Yet, it must be said: rituals don't always work.
At least not perfectly.

Rituals can, too often, simply become habits.

And when that happens,
what once helped us to feel joy or find meaning
or take comfort in our sorrow,
may not quite cut it anymore.

We may find ourselves just going through the motions.

And telling ourselves that we're trying to uphold tradition,
or that we're doing it because our parents or grandparents did it,
or we're doing it because, you know, everyone is doing it.

But when they're not working,
when rituals don't seem to matter to us like they maybe once did,
we might easily—and rightly—ask ourselves, “Why bother?”

It's an important question.

And if you find yourself asking it,
here, or in your day-to-day life,
I would challenge you to dig in to your rituals
until you find their deeper meaning.

Bring your whole self to the steps of the ritual.
Let your mind explore other ways of looking at what's happening.
Let your heart be moved by your own intention and commitment.

Because we don't always know what a ritual means
until we are actually doing it.

And the meaning can change.
It can and should be different from the last time.

I'm mindful of this when I walk labyrinths.

I've walked various labyrinths several times.

I walk the same steps in the same spiral toward the centre and out again,
and, yet, I've never ever had the same experience twice.

Because who I am when I enter a labyrinth is not the same version of me that entered the labyrinth the last time.

In the Jewish tradition, it's said that Jews read through the Torah every year, not because the Torah has changed, but because they have.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus reminded us that you can't step in the same river twice.

And so we return to rituals again and again to find ourselves anew.

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We come again, then, this morning to one of the enduring rituals of our Unitarian faith, our Flower Communion.

We can be reminded in these moments of this ritual's historical roots.

Of the story of Nobert Capek,
the minister of the Unitarian church in Prague,
who created this ritual in 1923.

We can recall how when the Nazis took control of Prague in 1940,
they found Dr. Capek and his gospel proclaiming
the inherent worth and beauty of every person
to be—as Nazi court records show—
“...too dangerous to the Reich to be allowed to live.”

And we can remember that for this,
Dr. Capek was sent to Dachau and died a cruel death.

We can also look to this beautiful bouquet of flowers,
and see, symbolically, the dazzling diversity of the human family.

We can see the beauty of human community,
and that that community is made up of unique and exotic individuals,
who, for all their differences, have taken root in life's same soil.

We can also see here beauty, strength, and resilience.

And we can see the fragile and fleeting nature of life.

Each flower here a memento mori, a sacred reminder,
that life is precious and all-too-brief.

Each flower an invitation to take up the poet's call to compassion
for all who journey through this life with us.

What if you knew you'd be the last
to touch someone?
If you were taking tickets, for example,
at the theater, tearing them,
giving back the ragged stubs,
you might take care to touch that palm,
brush your fingertips
along the life line's crease.

When a man pulls his wheeled suitcase
too slowly through the airport, when
the car in front of me doesn't signal,
when the clerk at the pharmacy
won't say *Thank you*, I don't remember
they're going to die.

A friend told me she'd been with her aunt.
They'd just had lunch and the waiter,
a young gay man with plum black eyes,
joked as he served the coffee, kissed
her aunt's powdered cheek when they left.
Then they walked half a block and her aunt
dropped dead on the sidewalk.

How close does the dragon's spume
have to come? How wide does the crack
in heaven have to split?
What would people look like
if we could see them as they are,
soaked in honey, stung and swollen,
reckless, pinned against time?

Friends, you could look at this collection of flowers
and see only its splendour and take in its lovely fragrance.

But you can also see here, if you look closely enough,
a summons to love your life more deeply.

And, by taking home, at the end,
another flower than the one you brought forward,
you can hear here the noble call to love your neighbour as yourself.

May this ritual which we keep, keep us.

May it call us ever more deeply into life,
and ever onward to love.

Amen.