

A sermon preached the Congregational Church of Almaden Valley, United Church of Christ
San Jose, CA
Date: July 25, 2010
Rev. Kevin M. Smith
Luke 11:1-13 (Psalm 138)

Ritually Speaking

Every now and then it's good to examine our habits. We usually form habits so that we don't have to think too deeply about how we go about our daily business. Habits can be good and bad for us. Some habits are neither good nor bad, they just are like putting on our clothes a particular way—perhaps the shirt before the pants or vice versa or the right shoe and then the left shoe or vice versa. Some habits are bad like drinking that chocolate chip caramel Starbucks frappuccino with whip cream on top every afternoon. Some habits are good like recycling your newspapers or eating green vegetables every evening for supper. Some habits we leave behind as we grow older and we pick up other habits to help us get through life when we get older.

Rituals are the habits of the church. They are the practices that for one reason or another down throughout the years, down throughout the centuries in fact, we have started and kept practicing. Each Christian denomination practices its own rituals and many Christian denominations practice the same rituals although they may practice them differently. What are some of the rituals of the church you can name? *Are there rituals at our church here at Almaden Valley that we practice that you think no other church practices? Why? Can you remember how they came about or when we started practicing them?*

Well, since our gospel lesson this morning is about the ritual we practice called the "Lord's Prayer," let's talk about it. First of all what do you notice about Luke's version of the prayer? Where is the other version of the Lord's Prayer in the Gospels?—Matthew, right. (Matt. 6:9-13: ⁹*"Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.* ¹⁰*Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.* ¹¹*Give us this day our daily bread.* ¹²*And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.* ¹³*And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.* Matthew's prayer comes from Jesus during his sermon on the mount. Luke's version of the Jesus prayer takes place after Jesus has just visited Martha and Mary in their home. And then, of course, we get different versions of the various denominations: Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, and Protestant. The first church I attended and the way my

parents taught me was using the word “trespasses” rather than “debts.” I didn’t start using “debts” until we started attending the Presbyterian Church.

Here is a version I really like. It goes like this: *Our Father in heaven, may we get your name right, honoring your reputation. Your culture come. Your loving desire be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today the bread we need today (not hoarding tomorrow's bread, too). Forgive us our sins so that we might give up our desires for vengeance and live in the light of forgiveness with others. Save us from the trials of being made the victim, and deliver us from such evils when they come upon us. Amen.* I like because it uses very plain language to get at some of my core beliefs about God: for instance, there is a culture of God that some people call the “kingdom of God” that we want to live in. I think that is a culture of love, forgiveness and mercy, justice doing and justice making, and compassionate and generous living. I believe God’s *desires* these things for us and that we would live in a world like that I have described. This prayer by Paul Nuechterlein expresses the hope that we will share our bread and not consume at the expense of other children of God and it recognizes that human cultures have too often made victims of the person who is weak or different or strange.

Why do you think we have all these different versions of the “Lord’s Prayer?” Even our Christian cannon does not agree on just one version of the prayer. Why do we have Christians all over the world saying the prayer differently this Sunday morning? Is that a good or bad thing?

And where would we be without the ritual of humor in our sermons? Ok, just to be ritually right here is one for you:

A guy from Tyson Foods arranges to visit the Pope. After receiving the papal blessing he whispers, "Your Eminence, we have a deal for you. If you change The Lord's Prayer from 'give us this day our daily bread....' to 'give us this day our daily chicken....' then we will donate \$500 million dollars to the Church".

The Pope responds saying, "That is impossible. The Prayer is the Word of the Lord and it must not be changed."

"Well," says the Tyson man, "we are prepared to donate \$1 billion to the Church if you change the Lord's Prayer from 'give us this day our daily bread....' to 'give us this day our daily chicken....'"

Again the Pope replies "That is impossible. The Prayer is the Word of the Lord and it must not be changed."

Finally, the Tyson guy says, "This is our last offer. We will donate \$5 billion to the church if you change the Lord's Prayer from 'give us this day our daily bread....' to 'give us this day our daily chicken....'" and he leaves.

The next day the Pope meets with the College of Cardinals to say that he has good news and some bad news.

"The good news is that the Church has come into \$5 billion."

*"The bad news is that we are losing The Wonderbread Account!"**

And why is it that people in congregational churches always so quiet? It's certainly not that way in our African American sister churches. Is that a ritual with us or what? Perhaps the Sunday school teacher knows best...

A Sunday school teacher asked her little children, as they were on the way to church service, "And why is it necessary to be quiet in church?"

One bright little girl replied, "Because people are sleeping!"^a*

But seriously folks, let me ask you the even tougher question? How many of us actually think about the meaning of the words and message of the ritual prayer when we say it every Sunday? Ok, you don't have to answer that question. Many of our religious rituals lose their "umph" after say or doing them over and over again over many years. We forget why we started doing them in the first place or we forgot to make meaning with them in our lives outside of the church. When that happens our religious or spiritual rituals just become as plain as putting on our right shoe before our left shoe—they become habits and we don't really seek meaning in them. It doesn't mean that they are not important to do or that we should have no rituals, but we should stand on guard every now and then and really look at why we worship the way we do and why we practice this ritual or that ritual. I think it helps sometimes for "change-up" our rituals in order to mildly shock us out of our complacency. That's why sometimes I like to like to say a different version of the Lord's Prayer. I think we should also change up the

^a Jokes from religious jokes website.

way we do communion from time to time and maybe even the order of the service or the kind of music we sing. As we can tell by all the different ways in which even Christians across the world come to God or worship God—there are many paths to finding the sacred in our lives. And we can find the sacred in our lives in other places besides church, too. You may experience the sacred in hiking a mountain trail, or working in your garden, or taking care of your grandchild, or watching a great PBS special, or in cooking for your family or a close friend. You may even find the sacred when you are all alone and being quiet enough to listen to the spirit of God within you. Amen.

Copyright © 2010 by Rev. Kevin M. Smith. All rights reserved. The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright ©1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. All rights reserved.