

“Shall We Break Bread Together?”

Salado UMC, Salado, Tx 76571

Preaching Text: Exodus 12:1-14

6 September 2020—14th Sunday after Pentecost

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“It seemed to be a necessary ritual that he should prepare himself for sleep by meditating under the solemnity of the night sky . . . a mysterious transaction between the infinity of the soul and the infinity of the universe” (— Victor Hugo).

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Once I sat in a Nashville, Tennessee hotel lobby waiting for a taxi to take me to the United Methodist Publishing House. While in that lobby I listened to a young woman give the same allegedly polite, but decidedly routine speech to each and every customer checking out of the hotel. “Yes, sir. Thank you for choosing Hampton Inns, West End. We thank you for your business and hope the next time you return to Nashville you will choose to lodge with us. Thank you for your decision to stay with us.”

The only problem with this particular “ritual of politeness” was that she delivered the speech in precisely the same monotone voice and never wavered from one customer to the next. I could only image some poor soul being locked out of his room, appearing in the lobby in a bathing robe, standing in front of the young women and she saying to him: “Yes, sir. Thank you for choosing Hampton Inns, West End. We thank you for your business”

This illustration about ritual is a negative example. No one ever intended the idea of ritual to be words spoken by rote, without feeling or meaning. One can hardly imagine the story of Texas A&M’s “Twelfth Man” or the “A&M Tradition” relayed in a lifeless or indifferent way. When we recite the Pledge of Allegiance, do we repeat it lacking feeling? Do we then say the Pledge has lost its meaning for us? I hope not. Anyone can turn our meaningful rituals into dry and pointless sets of words and actions, but ritual has a deeper—and what I would like to call a teaching (pedagogical) purpose. Ritual helps us pass along those meanings and interpretations of our common life together which are bigger than the words we use to express or explain them. This is why ritual is so important in the life of faith.

Ritual helps people enact their faith. Ritual tells others about the things we hold dear, although most of us could hardly articulate why these things are so important. Ritual is also important in the church realm. Yet, many modern people forsake it. They forsake ritual because they do not understand that for the past 2000 years the church has helped people value life

and faith in ways that we can scarcely articulate. Previous to the existence of the church, Israel too, celebrated the rituals of faith.

We all have family rituals—birthdays, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, first day of dove season, and so on.

I remember when I was part of a ritual of beginning a new baseball season. Our then music director sang our national anthem, and I was fortunate that the Rangers asked me to offer the opening prayer. The club introduced the players. We generally followed the identical format that has been in place for over twenty years—probably much longer. Ritual helps us understand things in ways that often defy mere words. Our lesson tells us of a ritual that preceded the events it describes. Hear our lesson:

[12:1] The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: [2] This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. [3] Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. [4] If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. [5] Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats.

[6] You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. [7] They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. [8] They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. [9] Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. [10] You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. [11] This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly. It is the Passover of the Lord.

[12] For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. [13] The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. [14] This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance (Exodus 12:1-14).

Ritual gives us a sense of who we are. Ritual helps set the context of our life. When we celebrate the ritual meal of communion, which Jesus links to the Passover Seder, the meal tells the story of Jesus. The meal also tells our story as believers, too. When we see the bread broken and the cup offered, then we find ourselves in the midst of the greatest of all stories. Sometimes words are unnecessary and the meal that night was one of those nights which illumines every other night.

Jesus reminds us of what happens to people who grasp their relationship with God— liberation and freedom. May we all eat with Jesus and experience the freedom God offers us in Christ.

David Neil Mosser, Senior, Salado UMC, Salado TX 76571