

“P.O.T.T.”
Sermon by Rev. Kristin Gerner Vaughn, Guest Preacher
Peace United Church of Christ
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I want to start with a bit of a ritual that used to happen at my grandmother's house. When I was a child, my grandmother had a swinging back door. My grandmother's back door nearly swung off of its hinges more than one day. She had a modest home—a single wide, neatly decorated and full of love. It was a well-known fact among the members of the community that at 11:00 a.m. on 1930 Rock Creek Dairy Road, Rosa would have fresh vegetables cooking on the stove—hot, fresh cornbread and background noise of Bob Barker spinning the big wheel and making a deal. Green beans, stewed squash, onions and pinto beans—oh, it was never fancy. She served straight out of the pots themselves, but she always seemed to serve up as much love as food. She, like most folks who grew up in her time, knew how to stretch a morsel of food into the feeding of 5,000 with leftovers at the end, but every now and then, it got a little close. People seemed to just “stop by for a visit”, oh, say, about 11:10. I think they came as much for the food as for the fellowship, and it is funny how the minister of the church always seemed to show up at about 11:15. Friends and ministers alike craved routine doses of faith and fellowship from that kitchen.

Needless to say, “Mawmaw” never knew who was coming for lunch, so she had a system. If family was present and unexpected guests showed up to dinner, “Mawmaw” would say very early in the meal “F.H.B.—F.H.B.”. Those letters stood for “Family hold back”. “Mawmaw” wanted us to hold back from taking a big serving of mashed potatoes or anything else until our company had been filled to satisfaction, but if there was a good amount of food that day, so she would say “P.O.T.T.”—plenty on the table! It was then her family knew we could have as much as we wanted because there was enough food for her company and for us. Rituals! “F.H.B.” and “P.O.T.T.” was one of ours. I know you have your own. I know this church has its own. You say words of institution—a familiar ritual before serving communion to each other. Rituals are important.

The Israelites knew about rituals. In fact, rituals have been around so long that they can drum up a whole host of ideas and emotions from people. If you say “ritual”, some people snarl at that because, well...that means stuck in the mud. Ritual means never willing to bend. Well...maybe...but ritual in THIS case means that it is the axle from which one turns and revolves. It is not quicksand in which one gets stuck. Ritual!

Ritual is so important that in the Exodus text today, as Moses has already been standing shoeless by the burning bush, he heard the words of God sending him to be with the Israelites in captivity in Egypt. Moses gets there and the plagues come, and people are tired and anxious, and God says to them “Here's the beginning of your new life together. This is the beginning”. The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt “This month shall be for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you”. Beginnings are hard.

Our 4 year old went to preschool this week. She was in day school last year for a couple of days a week, but this year it is 5 days in a row. Monday she had a break. Tuesday and Wednesday okay. By Thursday, she was getting a little grumpy in the mornings, and come Friday we were just in an all-out meltdown, and I said “Kathryn, what's going on with you this morning?” She put her head down and she said “Mama, it's just so hard to be in school”. It is hard to begin new things. It is hard to change. It is hard to go from the way you have been doing something to the way you are being called to do something.

There were the Israelites—encamped, enslaved, oppressed. Who wouldn't want out of that? They did too, at least in word. They wanted out, but the hard part was that they didn't know what was coming next, so it was hard to leave where they already were.

I think Kathryn really does want to learn to write her name, but doggone, that “K” is hard!

We, I think, all need rituals. We all want to grow. We all want to get to where it is that God is calling us, but it is hard to begin. It is hard to leave the old way and come into a new way. Ritual helps.

This ritual of the Passover orients us to time. Not only is this the beginning, but it repeats itself, and the Israelite people began to mark their calendars by this time in their lives. It helped them to be “other-focused” as good rituals do. If a ritual is not helping you to be focused on others and, in church, if a ritual is not helping you to be focused on our Creator, then the ritual may need to be tweaked.

The ritual of Passover focused on others, and this is one way how. When it was time to kill the fatted calf or goat, they killed one that was the size that they needed—not extra-large, not extra small—and if the one that you had was bigger than the one you needed, do you remember what they did? What did they do? They shared. They teamed up with another family because at the end of the evening, you couldn’t have anything left over. Use it all, eat it all because now is the time to gird up your loins—to eat this meal standing up as they say, for now is the time to move quickly. You can’t hear the news and not believe that.

Now is the time, a beginning of our months as a congregation, as Christians, as believers in rituals that point to the Creator. People are hurting. People are fighting. People don’t understand how to see the Christ in others, and now is the time for us to be at our best and to move our quickest. Now is the time for us to enter speed, to not be quiet, but to move. Now is the time to figure out who we are and to whom we belong so that these rituals of ours—communion, the Easter festival, Heifer Project that you all do so well, the children’s Christmas program continue. Hopefully you are already thinking of others that happen in this very place with the work of your hands to help point others to the good work that you are doing. Now is the time that, if something is not working, don’t waste your time. Now is the time to begin something new—the new that God is calling us to do. Now is not the time for this family to hold back (F.H.B.) because there is plenty on this table.

I resigned from Brick Reformed UCC at the end of April. It was a bitter-sweet moment, as both Mike and I knew it was time for me to be at home with our children at this time in their lives. Since April, we have had the wonderful opportunity to visit around from church to church—churches I have heard of but had not had the opportunity to visit on Sunday mornings for worship to see the good things that were happening in the congregations around where I had been living and serving, to meet other people and to see other rituals as other churches had embodied them, but what we were missing was communion, and I didn’t know it until this week. It just seemed that the churches we were visiting we had not hit them on a communion Sunday.

As of this week, Emma said at night time “Mom, I want a snack”. I asked “What do you want, honey?” She said “I want some grape juice”. Thinking we didn’t have any, I went scrounging in the spots where it would have been hidden if I had some. I found a small bottle that I am sure I had bought a 6-pack of to use doing homebound communion at some point. Not sure that it was good still, I opened it and split it up between the children, and before I gave it to them, I took a sip of it. As that grape juice hit my tongue, it made me weep—completely unexpectedly. Sitting in my kitchen, as I drank this juice, I realized how important the ritual of the table is for our family. The moment was soon over, but what I realized was, regardless of how we orient ourselves to time, now is the time that God is putting plenty on the table so that you can do plenty of good works in the circles where you go, in the places where you visit, with the people you will meet and with the strangers who need you to find them.

In the name of our God who creates us, redeems us, sustains us and hopes always for you to remember that there is plenty on the table for you—Amen.