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“The Heart of Faith”

John 17:20-26 | Read the scripture online <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=218613475>

Human beings are meaning-seeking creatures.¹ We want to understand our place in the grand scheme of things and reassure ourselves that life has meaning. This is not a new thing. Fly to Paris and drive about 300 miles south into the countryside and you'll find archaeologists painstakingly uncovering burial sites made by Neanderthals 50,000 years ago. The graves tell us something about the stories and myths of the Neanderthals' world. For example, the Neanderthals buried their dead in a foetal position, as though preparing the deceased for rebirth. There would often be fossilized animal bones found in the grave, suggesting some sort of ritual was conducted at the time of burial. And the fact that our ancestors did not simply discard the dead bodies with indifference, but buried them with ceremony points to their intuitive awareness that this reality was connected with a larger, divine reality. We are meaning-seeking creatures, and part of the answer to that search has long meant believing in a divine plane of existence that exists alongside our world and in some way supports our world.²

I say “part of the answer” because believing in another plane of existence only has worth if there is some way to connect with that plane. Early human societies believed in a Sky God, but this distant Creator-god was too far removed from humans to be directly involved in their daily lives. They also believed in a Mother Earth goddess, someone tied to the seasons of nature, who oversaw the cycles of life and death. Soon lesser gods followed, leading to more rituals and idols carved out of stone and wood until all these things were swept off the table with the monotheism of the ancient Hebrews. Deuteronomy 6:4: *Hear O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord. You shall love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.* It is interesting that the way forward with this faith in One God still involves doing rituals like our ancient ancestors did. I would explain it this way: Your head may understand the depth of faith, how this world involves the rich interplay of human action and divine action; your hands may express the faith you believe through deeds of compassion and justice. But, the heart of faith is best shaped by a common life of worship, prayer and rituals. For it is here with candles and cathedral-spaces, here with baptism fonts and water, here with tables set with bread and wine that faith comes alive.

This may not be a popular view. Many people today want to say they're “spiritual” but not “religious.” They insist that they can be just as close to God out in the forest, or along sandy beaches, or on green fields that have a slight dogleg to the left but with a good 7 iron shot and a tail wind; all is well with the world. But this spirituality is too often just “me-centered faith,” self-defined and self-focused. As imperfect as the institutional church is, it is here in these spaces, in these crazy, challenging, religious communities of young and old, saints and sinners, that the deepest, truest part of faith in God is lived out.

To explain this, this is Week #3 of sermons using New Zealand illustrations. The Maoris of New Zealand identify themselves as *tangata whenua*, people of the land. And they have a ritual that reinforces the person's primal connection with their homeland. After a child is born, the placenta that surrounded the infant in the mother's womb is buried in the child's ancestral village. Wherever people may go in their life, a part of them is forever grounded in their homeland. Second, when important things need to be



discussed in a Maori community, they gather in a sacred house called a *marae*. They remove their shoes and follow formal rituals around who can speak and how decisions are to be made. Visitors are welcomed with a special *powhiri* ceremony, which includes the touching of foreheads and noses. In this ritual, you can look directly into a person's eyes, seeing them as a friend and not an enemy. More importantly, you literally breathe the same air, like the breath of air first given by God when life began. In that act, you become one. The stranger is now also *tangata whenua*.

Now think about the rituals that give your life meaning. There are secular rituals, like birthday parties, in which years are counted on candles and then blown out with a wish. There are civic rituals, like saying the pledge of allegiance or voting in elections (repeat after me) that mark us as people of a shared nation. But sacred rituals are critical, for they alone touch on the meaning of life itself. Prayer is one such ritual. When Jesus was preparing for his time of trial, he offered a prayer with his disciples, some of which we heard in our gospel reading. He spoke about how through him there is a fundamental connection between the divine plane and the earthly plane: "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us" (vs. 21). This prayer is for a coming together, a unity based not on organizational structure or doctrinal purity or political affinity, but on love: "I in them and you in me, that they may be completely one." Why? "So that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (vs. 23). The ritual of prayer—done with intentionality, done as a community of forgiven sinners, done in a spirit of humility, guided by scripture, enfolded within silence—is something at the heart of Christian faith.

On the same night when Jesus prayed this prayer for his disciples, he also gathered with them around a table for a ritual meal. For too long the communion table has been a point of divergence in the Christian world. Doctrinal difference over this sacrament keeps much of the church divided into two separate communions. Yes Jesus said, "This is my body that is for you" (I Cor 11:24). Yet the bread by itself means nothing, whether it is the literal body of Christ in a Catholic mass or a sign and seal of Christ's presence in the Protestant communion service. The bread only means something when it is ritually held out in our hands as we stand together at table for a shared meal. It only means something when it is broken so that it can be given away freely, lovingly. It only means something when it nourishes someone who is hungry, or when it becomes part of who you are and everything you do from that moment onward. By eating from the same loaf, this ritual is at the heart of our Christian faith.

After Jesus was crucified and then appeared to the disciples as the risen Lord, the women and men of faith told his story to the world. The ritual associated with hearing that story in a deep and profound way was something that involved the most common of all elements: water. For example, when the apostle Paul went to the city of Philippi, he went outside the city walls to the nearby river. There Lydia and some women listened to his words about the risen Christ and immediately they stepped into the water and were baptized.

The baptism ritual is far from mundane. It is not simply taking a bath. It is not like going swimming or having your hair washed. In some churches, the worship leaders will tell you to remember your baptism as they walk up the aisle splashing you with water. There you are, all dressed up and trying to look respectable, when you get hit in the face with drops of water. Yet that's actually closest to capturing the radical nature of this sacred act. The gospel of Christ directly challenges any approach to life that would have us ignore the divine presence all around us. The gospel of Christ grabs us, rattles our cages, and rocks our foundations. It's a cold splash in the face telling us to get over ourselves, to quit



thinking we're in control and we're all that matters; to kneel down for once, to strip off our designer rags and put on a garment that actually means something in this world. And then water is poured on us. It is poured on helpless children as a reminder that no one earns a spot in God's guest house because all, from the weakest and tiniest to the strongest and tallest, enter by grace alone. It is poured on acned-adolescents, creaky-boned old-timers, and everyone in-between. It is a ritual that creates community *precisely* because it doesn't let anyone limit the guest list. By sharing in baptism and seeing the lingering shimmer of water on one's another's head, we take part in the ritual that is at the heart of our Christian faith. If you ever wondered when was the best time to invite a friend to church, do it when we remember the dead, when we baptize the young, or when we share communion together. Those times are not when the church is being its old, institutional, musty worst. That's when the church is being its richest, ancient, sacred best. In those moments, God in Christ, through the Holy Spirit can open your guests' eyes so they can truly see what their heart longs to see. Trust me.

T.S. Eliot said, "History is a pattern of timeless moments."³ To move in the depths of faith, and act with hands of faith, requires the "timeless moments of sacred rituals." It requires rituals that offer answers to questions that have troubled our human souls for thousands of years. We pray and ask aloud, "Am I alone?" and the ritual voice replies, "No, you're not. I am who I am." We hunger for food and community, and the dead-yet-risen One ritually says, "Share this bread. I am with you always." We stumble and struggle and wonder if it will ever be right, when the water drenches us and the Spirit says, "You are my beloved, with whom I am well-pleased." These are far more than hollow acts and musty religious rites. Jesus said: "I in them, you in me, that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them, that they may be completely one, as we are one." Friends, that is the heart of faith.

AMEN.

¹ Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*, 2005, p. 2.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4; see also Joe Alper, "Re-thinking Neanderthals", *Smithsonian.com*, June 2003.

³ T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," *Four Quartets*, line 234-235.

