

PRACTICING OUR FAITH: DO STRANGE THINGS

When a group of people has been living together and interacting with one another for any period of time they will develop their own peculiar rituals. I mean that word “peculiar” in two ways. The rituals will be specific to that group, reflective of the group’s unique history. And the rituals also will be peculiar in the sense that they can seem quite odd—to those outside the group most surely but, on occasion at least, to those who are part of the group as well.

When people meet at deeper levels, when their relationships with one another are more profound than perfunctory, it is more likely that ritual will play an important role. That is why rituals are particularly embedded into the lives of families and religious communities. In families and religious communities, rituals are as important as they are peculiar.

Probably all of us could think of examples of our own family’s peculiar rituals, but I particularly like this example from Chapin’s family: a year ago last November, at our weekly staff meeting, I asked about everyone’s plans for Thanksgiving--what folks were going to do and what they particularly looked forward to. When it came Chapin’s turn, he said, “Well, Tammie and I are going to New York to be with my family and I’m particularly looking forward to playing golf.” That got our attention, because it was an especially raw and blustery November. There was a lot of rain then that soaked the earth like liquid ice. The very thought of playing golf in such conditions made those of us around the table shiver. The idea of playing golf at such a time seemed downright bizarre and no sane person’s idea of a good time.

But then Chapin explained that playing golf on Thanksgiving is a long-standing tradition in his family. It began many years ago with his grandfather and his father. The day before Thanksgiving they would ritually paint the balls orange (that was before such colors were commercially available) and they would play a round of golf the next day, Thanksgiving Day, no matter the weather. Sometimes it rained. Sometimes it snowed. Sometimes snow drift hazards were added to the sand traps. But they played. Every year. When the Garner males came of age, they joined the Thanksgiving game of golf. Now they all play together. Chapin says that it wouldn’t be Thanksgiving without that game. You can take the turkey and the mashed potatoes and the cranberry sauce—but leave the orange golf balls and the chance to shiver in the cold together. Peculiar. Important. Chapin said, “It’s the only time we’re all together. It brings us together.” I wonder if that is what his grandfather had in mind when he started the whole thing.

Some rituals may be even harder to explain than the Garner Thanksgiving golf game, particularly if the ritual is ancient and its origins are obscure, as is demonstrated by this story another of my colleagues, David Carrier, shared with me. As many of you know, David is not only Director of Music here at the Village Church, but also at Temple Beth Israel in Newton. This is not an uncommon arrangement—church musicians tend to be broad minded and flexible people (at least the ones I know) and the Sabbaths of the two traditions are conveniently staggered to make it possible for a musician to play at both temple and church.

So, one day this fall, David told me about Temple Beth Israel's celebration of the Jewish holiday known as Sukkoth. It is a harvest festival that has ancient roots. In fact, the manner in which the holiday is celebrated to this day is all laid out in the biblical book of Leviticus. It is not explained but simply prescribed. Following traditions that are thousands of years old, in the temple that day there was a kind of temporary booth that reminds Jews of the temporary dwellings that were their homes during the years of wandering in the wilderness. This structure is then festooned with various fruits and vegetables. And, again, following a ritual that is older than memory, David Whiman, the rabbi of the Temple Beth Israel, took the biblically prescribed branches of the palm, willow, myrtle and citron trees and waved them to the four cardinal points of the compass--north, south, east and west.

Then, as the service was concluding, Rabbi Whiman turned to David and said, "Sometimes it is just plain weird being part of an ancient people." I love that story because it reminds me of the peculiarity and power of rituals--the peculiarity of doing such strange things and the power that keeps us coming back to certain rituals over and over again, sometimes for thousands of years.

Leon Wieseltier, the Literary Editor of *The New Republic* magazine, witnesses to the power in strange rituals in his recent book, *Kaddish*. Wieseltier's parents were Holocaust survivors from Poland. They maintained the practices of Orthodox Judaism when they moved to Brooklyn, where their son Leon was born. When Leon left Brooklyn to go across the river to Columbia University, then on to Oxford and Harvard, he left behind the rigors of Orthodox Jewish practice. When he started writing for *The New Republic*, and particularly when he married the daughter of a Pakistani merchant prince (a Muslim), his conversion to a completely secular way of life seemed complete. Wieseltier became—and in his case this is not a tautology—something of a glamorous intellectual, one of Washington's glitterati, invited to the best parties in Washington, an enfant terrible known for his stiletto wit and withering opinions.

Then Wieseltier's father died at the age of 81. After his father's death, for reasons that were not easy to explain even to himself, Wieseltier vowed, in the tradition of obedient Jewish sons, to say the mourning Kaddish--a traditional prayer for mourners--in precisely the manner prescribed by rabbinical authority, three times daily for eleven months. What is striking about the prayer is that, although it is prescribed for mourners, it does not offer a single consoling word. Rather, it is a great hymn of praise to the majesty of God. Nevertheless, as Wieseltier faithfully offered this prayer--morning, noon and night--he grew fascinated by the strange rite and its obscure origins. He sifted through ancient and medieval texts in search of clues, keeping a journal of his odyssey.

His journal became the book, *Kaddish*. It is part memoir, part scholarly excursion--all of it prompted by his encounter with this ancient prayer, with a strange ritual he did not fully understand but faithfully kept. He writes, "It was not long before I understood that I would not succeed in insulating the rest of my existence from the impact of this obscure and arduous practice. The symbols were seeping into everything. A season of sorrow became a season of soul-renovation, for which I was not at all prepared."

Ritual practices, strange and obscure, can do that. You may start out following a particular ritual for the shallowest of reasons, only to discover, over time, that it dips very deep into otherwise undisturbed territory in your soul. At first you may follow a ritual solely because it is tradition--that is, because someone told you to. But then, over time, you can no longer imagine your life without it, even though you can't fully explain why. The ritual may be peculiar, but there is power in the peculiarity.

The Lord's Supper is such a ritual. It is strange on the surface of it, this talk about body and blood. So strange that the church over the centuries has taken pains to explain it. Many of those explanations are quite convoluted and, finally, all of them are insufficient.

I wonder if the meaning and power of this sacrament is not simpler than theologians sometimes have made it out to be--not less mysterious, but simpler perhaps. Here is Jesus, aware that he is not going to be around very much longer and wanting to leave those closest to him with a ritual that would continue to bring them together--not unlike Chapin's grandfather starting that Thanksgiving golf game.

And I think Jesus knew how important it would be for his disciples to have something more than stories to sustain them. Jesus wanted to give them something to do in remembrance, something that looks and feels more like life. So what Jesus chose was a meal, a simple meal, something they had shared many times and would share many times after Jesus was gone.

So he instructed his followers on what he wanted them to do. He did not offer explanations, theological or otherwise. He told them to gather around the table. Sit shoulder to shoulder, knee to knee. Break the bread. Share the cup. And in some mysterious way I will continue to be there with you.

By choosing such an everyday event, Jesus gave his followers ample opportunity to remember. This ritual would be caught up in the everyday rhythm of his friends' lives. It was a way of reminding them that Jesus would be with them throughout all of their days, even the most mundane of Thursdays, through the most simple and common activities.

As for this talk of body and blood, it can seem most peculiar to us. In Hebrew idiom, however, to speak of someone's body and blood is to say the whole person. So, Jesus was saying that when everyone gathered around the table, he would be there, not in some wispy or glancing way, but that he would *really* be there, fully present, body and blood.

In the end, explanations of how the Spirit of Jesus is present in this meal do not satisfy. As with great art--the most important part of a ritual like this is what is left after all the explanations are finished. Or, as John Calvin said of this sacrament we are about to share, "I would rather experience it than explain it."

So, come now. I do not offer an explanation as much as an invitation, an invitation to gather about this table. As Jesus' old friends once gathered around the table with him, they are now joined by other friends, even joined by you and me. It is a ritual of an ancient people, yet as fresh as our own daily need for spiritual refreshment.

If you find it difficult to experience the presence of the Spirit of Christ in this meal, simply experience those around you, for Christ dwells in them and in this body that Christ has claimed for his own.

And if this morning this practice still seems strange to you, an odd and peculiar ritual, remember Chapin's family playing golf on Thanksgiving. Now *that's* peculiar. And important.