

1st Corinthians 11:17-29 “God Is All About the Verb”

One of the fun things I did on Sabbatical was visit other churches. Two of the six I visited were Disciples congregations. Take a wild guess what I missed the most when I visited the non-Disciples congregations? You got it! Communion. I had it three times in the nine weeks that I was away. Had I not been lucky enough to catch Bidwell Presbyterian on the first Sunday of the month, I wouldn't have had communion in any other church besides the two Disciple ones I visited. And even then, I thought it was a little odd that one of the Disciples churches I visited had communion in the middle of the service instead of at the end, but I've seen that done before. In fact, I've served two congregations that had it in the middle, but it was still sort of weird considering the church I've served for the last eight (almost nine) years “saves the best for last.”

My best guess is that all but two of the congregations I visited are celebrating World Communion Sunday with us today. Some churches, like Bidwell Presbyterian, celebrate the Lord's Supper once a month. Some celebrate once a quarter. Others celebrate only once a year if you can believe that. I was talking to a former member of one of those “once-a-year” communion churches, and they said something like, “Well see ... it's kind of just for show anyway.” For show? What do you mean? “Well ... this church doesn't believe that anyone is actually worthy to take communion, so they set up the table like we would in a Disciples church. Words of institution, blessing the bread and cup ... just like we do. But when it's time to actually come forward and take it, no one does. In fact, if you do, you get funny looks because it's like, ‘Oh who made you Mrs. Worthy-to-Take-Communion today, hmmm?’” So I asked, “But what happens to all the bread and ... what ... grape juice? Wine? What happens to that?” And they said, “I know, right?” Talk about monumental waste of food! All just to say, “You may be welcome, but you sure as heck aren't worthy!”

One of the chief criticisms of churches that take communion every week is that it's too “high church.” A friend of mine from a “once-a-quarter”

tradition said, “By having it so often, it gets reduced to one of those tired, old, habitual (and thus meaningless) rituals that plague institutional religion.” And you know what? There may be some truth in that. [Uh-oh. Don’t tell us that you picked up some sort of anti-Disciples virus while you were out there visiting other churches!] No, but I do want you to work with me and consider this notion okay? Remember, one of the things we’re trying to get away from is immediately dismissing things because they challenge us to look at things from another angle.

So ... lets be honest and admit that we love our rituals, okay? There’s something comforting about rock-steady rituals that help us through our day. For some people that might mean some sort of exercise routine, or yoga and meditation, or maybe something that has to do with food ... Taco Tuesday, Meatball Monday or Fruit Salad Friday. J.D. Vance in his book *Hillbilly Elegy* talks about his grandpa’s ritual of getting up at 5:30 a.m. *every ... day*, reading the morning paper and going down to the local McDonalds (rain or shine) to meet up with his fellow WWII vets who fought in the Pacific, drink bad coffee and talk about all the things wrong with the world. Rituals help us ease the way sometime. They get us through the day or the week or the month or whatever it is that we need to get through. There is *value* in our individual rituals. There is also value in the rituals we do together as a church too. Where we have to be careful is when we do them out of habit and they become stale and meaningless. It’s easy to just go through the motions of something we do routinely anyway. And as I said last week, we often do things just *because* they’re easy.

Remember, the God we worship, serve, and proclaim here at this church is deeply relational and created us to be the same. Because we are created in God’s image, we are at heart relational people even though there are times when it seems we work way too hard at asserting our independence from others and even from God! I re-read Paul Young’s *The Shack* over Sabbatical, and I’m glad I did. He has a lot to say about rituals and how they relate to our understanding of God. If you haven’t read *The Shack*, it’s a fictional story about Mack, a man who spends a

weekend with “The Trinity” ... Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit, in the place where his daughter was murdered years earlier. Young uses the story as a way to communicate his understanding of the different aspects of God by setting up these question and answer sessions between Mack and the Creator presented as an African-American woman called “Papa,” Christ, a not-terribly-attractive Middle Eastern carpenter named Jesus, and the Holy Spirit depicted as an Asian woman who is constantly in motion and who you can never get a good look at.

There are all sorts of reason why this book was controversial when it first came out. The fact that the Creator was presented as an African American woman was only the tip of the ice-berg. God was also presented as one who is not a fan of institutionalized religion. *“I don't create institutions: that's an occupation for those who want to play God... I'm not too big on religion, ... and not very fond of politics or economics either... They are the man-created trinity of terrors that ravages the earth and deceives those I care about.”*

This is, of course, where I put aside some of my theological issues with the author and said, “I *like* this guy! He has me hooked.” According to Young, Religion is all about rules and rituals, but God is all about relationship. And as I said last week: Following rules and habitually performing rituals is easier than maintaining relationships. They don't require us to do much other than put check marks next to the items on a list. “Yup ... did that! I'm good to go now. No need to do anything else!” Again, it's easier to follow a God who is all about rules than one who actively seeks to be in relationship with us and with those who we may not even like. See, we can handle checking things off lists or reducing the Bible to a rule book that measures whether we're doing things “right” or not. But when we're asked to lay aside our pre-conceived notions of God ... when we're asked to seek the heart of God ... when we're asked to bare our souls and let God re-shape our understanding of what it means to be in relationship with God and to others ... well ... that's uncomfortable. That's messy!

Our problem ... and this is something that came up in multiple occasions in my reading and in my interactions with other clergy over Sabbatical ... our problem is that we humans want to reduce everything we do in church to nouns. Now please don't get me wrong. Nouns are fine. I grew up on School House Rock. Remember the noun song? "A noun's a special kind of word, it's any name you ever heard. I find it quite interesting, a noun's a person, place or thing." But honestly nouns are boring without verbs. Verbs are exciting! Remember the schoolhouse rock song about the verb?

"Verb! That's what's happening! I get my thing in action! To be, to sing, to feel, to live... I put my heart in action to run, to go, to get, to give. Verb! You're what's happenin'! That's where I find satisfaction, yeah! To search, to find, to have, to hold... Verb! To be bold! When I use my imagination I think, I plot, I plan, I dream... Turning in towards creation I make, I write, I dance, I sing... When I'm feelin' really active I run, I ride, I swim, I fly! Other times when life is easy I rest, I sleep, I sit, I lie... Verb! That's what's happening!"

Verbs require action and imagination. But throughout history, we church people haven't always been famous for being terribly exciting. But did you know that even the very name of God is a verb? It's true! In your English translations of the Bible, when you're reading through what we call the "Old Testament," every time you see the word "LORD" in all caps when people refer to God? In the Jewish tradition, when you read the scriptures out loud, you're not supposed to say the name of God, so you say, "Lord" instead, even though the Hebrew name for God is written there right in front of you. Anybody know God's name? "Yahweh." Which in Hebrew means "I am that I am." God's name is a verb! But we humans are overwhelmed by this. We want to tame God. We, sometimes literally, want to put God in a box. And yet from age to age, the living, dynamic, everlasting, all-encompassing, all-loving God breaks out of our boxes, tears open the veils we created to hide ourselves from God's "am-ness" and says, "Quit trying to put limits on me!"

But verbs scare us! In church, we take some of the best verbs and suck all the fun and life out of them. God's verbs are full of life and possibilities! When we change them into boring old nouns, they are dead and full of law and fear and judgment. Take the words "expectation" and "responsibility." We use them a lot in church. Our kids ask us questions about why we do some of the things we do in church, and we say, "Because it's our responsibility" or "It's God's expectation of us." But both of those words are the noun forms of some really exciting verbs! When we hear the word, "expectation" we think "duty." But the verb, "expectancy?" That's an active, dynamic word! When I hear "expectancy" I think of a little kid just busting at the seams waiting to see what's in those presents on Christmas morning! I think, "duty" when I hear the word "responsibility" too. But the word "response?" I think of the applause and cheering you hear after a great performance at a concert!

This Lord's Table ... the ritual that we carry out here at church every week and that many other Christian traditions are doing as well this morning ... It was *meant* to be dynamic and relational. "This is my body broken for you. *Do this to remember me.*" In fact, this is probably one of the most relational "rituals" we do in church. Especially when we share it as it was meant to be shared. See, sometimes we call this "The Lord's Supper," which is okay I suppose. I like the term that the Anglicans, Catholics, and Orthodox churches use though. They use, "eucharist" which means "to give thanks." "Communion" is good too, because it's a dynamic word that describes that relationship between Creator and Creation ... we are communing with God and with each other.

So lets gather brothers and sisters. Let's gather at the table, give thanks for the love that God demonstrates to us through the saving acts and presence of Christ!