**More than Ritual**

**By Rev. Sheryl Stewart**

Deut. 6: 1-9 Hebrews 9: 11-14 Mark 12: 28-34

Psalm 119: 1-8

**Summary: Rituals are like the notes to a hymn: a helpful guide. Yet, the essential part is the song and the singing.**

Rituals, which are like sacramental habits, help me. The more mundane habit of things in a familiar way or putting things in the same place is like a string around my finger. That helps me remember something important or, at least, alerts me that I want to recall something! For example, the common having and caring for long, pretty nails helps remind me not to bite them. They remind me that I should act like a lady. They remind me that beauty is a gift which I ***can*** share.

Being reminded of many things thanks to a holy habit seems to be the idea behind God’s suggestions in Deuteronomy regarding the Ten Commandments. “Tie them to your arms,” God suggests. “wear them on your foreheads, carve them on your doorposts and gates.” God intended for His ways to be remembered and passed on.

All these suggestions, the conservative Jew does literally. Tiny boxes containing a list of the10 Commandments -- phylacteries -- are bound to the forearm or worn like headbands around the brow. Even Circumcision, another holy ritual, reminds the men of their covenant with God several times a day. For us gals, their circumcision reminds us that God really opens our womb and blesses us with children.

Rituals, evoking memory and community, are vital. So, that is what makes Mark’s account of Jesus and the teacher of the law so amazing when they discuss those Commandments and the rituals of their time! **[Read Mark 12: 28-34 again]**

The teacher not only agrees with Jesus, but he also sees that loving God and loving his neighbors is even more important than sacrifice! Now, sacrifice was the primary way in which the Jews sought to make themselves right with God. So, to say something is superior to this is huge!

Soon, we will celebrate our own ritual of Holy Communion. We Protestants only have Baptism and Communion as sacraments. Sacred moments = sacraments, moments we are sure God is right there. But, it is God who saves, not the moment of the sacrament. What God wants even more than a ritual jogging of our memories is our love. Rituals don’t guarantee love. Someone once told me that there are many scoundrels in the world whose baptism has not hindered them in the least.

As for the ritual elements of consecrated Bread and Wine, we clergy tend to consume the leftovers or save them for the next ritual lest they be desecrated. There was quite a row in the Middle Ages concerning what would happen if a mouse happened to nibble on or lap up a spill of the host (the blessed wafer and wine). Silly, isn’t it?

Paul said, in 1 Cor. 13, Paraphrasing what he taught there, “If I don’t have love – love for God and my neighbor, – anything I do profits me nothing!” Our worship needs to be more than rituals and special Days like Christmas, Easter, Pentecost and the rest. What God looks for and wants is something only we can give: namely, our love. Therefore, a cup of cold water given in Jesus’ Name is superior to the barrels of consecrated juice which I might drink in my lifetime.

The symbolism of digesting the bread and wine so that it becomes part of us is powerful. However, loving God and each other so much that our lives let the divine spill over is like the overflowing cup in Psalm 23, and is fundamental. Let’s have Communion now, but let’s make it more than a memorial and a reminder of holiness. Let’s be what we remember: the love of God incarnate, alive and active in our flesh and in our world! Amen.