

Romans 12:1-2

Micah 6:1-8

January 25, 2015

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

Focus on the Big Message
RELATIONSHIP NOT RITUAL

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A young woman was fixing her first Thanksgiving dinner. As she was getting everything ready on Wednesday night, she reminded herself to let the turkey finish thawing in the sink overnight. Just before going to bed, she put the turkey in the sink and placed the dish rack over the top of the bird. Her husband walked through the kitchen, saw the turkey with the dish rack on top of it, and asked her, “What are you doing?” She told him, “My mom always did that to help the turkey thaw.”

The next day her mom called to see how everything was going with the Thanksgiving dinner preparation. “Oh, mom, it’s just fine. I have everything ready to go in the oven. I even remembered to put the dish rack over the turkey in the sink last night.” This seemed to confuse her mother who asked, “What are you talking about?” The young woman said, “Oh, I remember how you always put the dish rack over the turkey when it was thawing in the sink.”

There was a pause on the end of the line, then her mother said, “Yes, but honey, we had cats!”¹

The “ritual” of putting the dish rack over the top of the turkey in the sink originally had a good and practical purpose. However, the original purpose was lost to the young woman, and she only remembered the “ritual.”

The story reminds me of a birthday party Nancy and I went to in Roanoke Rapids for our 4 year-old next door neighbor. This was at the height of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles craze, and Jeremy was all about Ninja Turtles. **Everything** at the party was Ninja Turtles, including pizza to eat (the Turtles’ favorite food). Jeremy was so excited he could hardly contain himself. When it was time for him to open his presents, he was literally standing on top of the table, ripping into the packages. He tore into one present and started yelling, “Oh boy! This is exactly what I wanted!” Somebody asked him, “What is it?” And Jeremy said, “I don’t know!”

How often is our religious life just like putting the dish rack on top of the turkey? How often do we get so caught up in the feelings and emotions of our rituals that we don’t even know or can’t even remember why we’re doing them? Even more than that, how often do our religious rituals become more important to us than the God we are worshiping with those rituals? Let’s take it one step further: How often do we convince ourselves that our religious rituals somehow put us in the right with God?

If we're really honest with ourselves — if we even think about it at all — we'd probably have to admit that, in a way, our religious rituals can become a way of trying to be right with God. At the very least, we spend more time and energy on getting the rituals right than we spend on being in a right relationship with God. Consciously or not — intentionally or not — we fall into the trap of going through the religious motions in our worship, but not making the connection between what we do in the sanctuary and what we do the rest of the week.

The prophet Micah preached during the 8th century B.C. He preached to his own people down south in Judea. Micah preached in common with Hosea, Amos, and Isaiah about two main topics: pure worship of God and social justice. In his preaching to the people and the religious leaders, these two — worship and lifestyle — can't be separated. Each affects the other — positively or negatively. God's people either walk the walk or they just talk the talk and go through the motions.

Maybe it will help us better hear this prophetic voice from 2700 years ago if we have an idea of what's going on in his time. The northern kingdom of Israel had fallen and the southern kingdom of Judah, Micah's home territory, was weak and vulnerable. The prosperity for some in Judah had come at the expense of the many — the rich were getting richer because the poor were getting poorer. The political threats of the day were tempting the king and his advisors to put more trust in fragile political and military alliances than in the God they were called to serve.

Imagine Micah 6 as a courtroom scene. The Lord has a case, a complaint, against Israel. God has called all of creation to hear the case. God demands to know from Israel what wrong he has done against them that would make them do the things they are doing and not do the things they weren't doing. Listen to the way *The Message* describes the opening scene in the courtroom:

Take your stand in court. If you have a complaint, tell the mountains; make your case to the hills. And now, Mountains, hear God's case; listen, Jury Earth — For I am bringing charges against my people. I am building a case against Israel.

“Dear people, how have I done you wrong? Have I burdened you, worn you out? Answer! I delivered you from a bad life in Egypt; I paid a good price to get you out of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you — and Aaron and Miriam to boot! Remember what Balak king of Moab tried to pull, and how Balaam son of Beor turned the tables on him. Remember all those stories about Shittim and Gilgal. Keep all God's salvation stories fresh and present.”

It's as if God made his case against us: *Dear people of the Wallace Presbyterian Church, how have I done you wrong? Have I burdened you, done you wrong? Answer me! I delivered you from sin and death by sending my only Son to live and die for you. I called you to be my people, to be faithful disciples of my Son. I gave you all of the spiritual gifts you need to do what I'm calling you to do. Remember everything I've done for you.*

The people then responded to God's case against them by asking what they needed to **do** — *How can I stand up before God and show proper respect to the high God?*

Should I bring an armload of offerings topped off with yearling calves? Would God be impressed with thousands of rams, with buckets and barrels of olive oil? Would he be moved if I sacrificed my firstborn child, my precious baby, to cancel my sin? (The Message)

That's like us asking God today, what can we do to make things right between us? Should we plan some magnificent worship service? Should we recruit fifty more people to be in the choir? Should we try to raise more money? Should we develop more programs? Should we pay more attention to the way we do things in worship? What can we **do**, Lord? Just tell us!

Well, the Lord **has** told us what to do, and it's not more and better religious rituals that he wants. I certainly don't think God is opposed to us worshiping him in here on Sunday mornings or at any other time of the week. I certainly hope God is pleased when we glorify his name with beautiful and majestic music. I pray that our worship and everything else we do as the Wallace Presbyterian Church is more than just empty religious ritual.

But that's not where we need to start, with our rituals and programs. They can be helpful in our life together as a community of faith, but only if we don't let them become the main focus of our life together as the people of God. If there is a disconnect between our worship in here and how we live out there in the world, God is not pleased. Over and over again, the prophets make that important connection between what God's people say they believe and what they actually do (or don't do) as God's people.

The foundation of who we are as God's people is the relationship we have with our God. We are God's people because of what **God** has done for us in Jesus Christ, not because of anything **we** do for God. Looking ahead a bit — in three weeks I will preach from Mark 12:28-34. One of the scribes asked Jesus which commandment is the first of all. When Jesus said, "Love God with everything you've got and love your neighbor as yourself," the scribe said, "You are right, Teacher . . . this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." In turn, Jesus told the man, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

Of course, our relationship with God brings with it responsibilities — to God and to other people. "*How shall I stand up before God and show proper respect to the high God?*" Again, listen to *The Message*: "*But he's already made it plain how to live, what to do, what God is looking for in men and women. It's quite simple: Do what is fair and just to your neighbor, be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don't take yourself too seriously — take God seriously.*"

It would be a lot easier just to come to worship, say the right words in the prayers and the creed, sing the hymns, put some money in the offering plate, and listen to the sermon, and then go home, wouldn't it? It would be a lot easier to stick with the comfortable rhythms and sounds of worship. It would be a lot more comfortable Monday - Saturday if we didn't let God's Word make a difference in what we do and how we live when we're away from this sanctuary.

But that's not what God wants from us, that's not what God *requires* of us as his people who call ourselves disciples of Jesus Christ. I learned something interesting this week about that word "require" — "What does the Lord *require* of you?" When that word is used in the Old Testament, it means more of a yearning and a desire than a demand or insistence on God's part. This is what God wants from us, yearns from and for us, desires from and for us as his people, because we are **already** God's people, because of what God has **already** done for us in Jesus Christ — "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God."

As we "focus on the big message" this year, the big message of "Love God/Love neighbor," let us remember the stories about God's salvation and keep them fresh. Let us remember **who** we are and **whose** we are. Let us make our relationships with God and one another more important than any ritual, no matter how comfortable and comforting and rich in meaning, especially if we can't always remember why we're doing what we're doing — like the dish rack on top of the turkey!

There is a story about the queen of the Belgians visiting Poland while Poland was still under communist rule. Everywhere she went, she was accompanied by a guard of the secret police. Since she was a Catholic, she often attended mass. On one occasion, while she was kneeling in prayer, she noticed that the guard standing beside her was moving his lips and saying the prayers. She was surprised and asked him, "Are you a Catholic?" to which he responded, "I believe, but I don't practice." She asked, "Then are you a Communist?" to which he answered, "I practice, but I don't believe."²

What does God require of **you** who have been saved through Jesus Christ?

To do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly with your God.

To believe **and** to practice.

Let us pray: Merciful God, transform us by the renewing of your Holy Spirit, that we may know what is your will — what is good and acceptable and perfect — and we may do what you require of us — to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with you. Amen.

NOTES

¹Found at www.snopes.com/weddings/newlywed/secret.asp

²Rev. Daniel Vestal, "A Rediscovery of Biblical Religion," Micah 6:8 at www.day1.org.