

Fourteenth Sunday after Epiphany. 10 September 2017. Creative ritual. The way we do things.

I expect many of us have seen the movie 'My Big Fat Greek Wedding'. It is an amazing meeting of two very different families with very different rituals and ways of doing things, ways of engaging with life. I have used that movie as an example in wedding preparation to get couples talking about the different ways that things were done in their families.

One scene that I found was a great way into that conversation was when Toula tells Ian about their way of celebrating Easter, including when her aunt Voula chases her around with a sheep's eyeball on a fork to get her to eat it because it will be good for her! Not every family celebrates Easter like that.

What are your family rituals? Can you think of special ways that your family do things, especially celebrating special days and events?

In my family, for some years at least, we would celebrate Christmas Eve with my godfather, then he would help us wrap presents, then midnight mass (where my brother and sister and I were usually singing in the choir) then we would open one present in the early hours of Christmas Day, sleep, ham and eggs for breakfast, church again, lunch at a hotel restaurant with my father's family then dinner in the evening with my mother's family ... then collapse exhausted (if we hadn't already along the way!).

What are some family rituals and patterns for special times or things you can think of which were important in your family along the way in life, just the way you did things?

Churches have particular ways of doing things too. What can you think of that has been done differently in other church communities where you have been? I went to one where we stood to pray and sat to sing. In some places the wine for Holy Communion comes in shot glasses instead of the chalice. Using books, printed sheets, data projection, different languages. There are many different ways of doing the things that we do.

Where do these things come from? Some are because that seems to be the easiest way of doing things. Some things we do because that is what happened in our family or church family and we just take it on board, even in a different context. Some are because of a particular idea about this being the only proper way to do what we do.

Some rituals and patterns of doing things are just fun. Like birthday presents always being hidden instead of handed over! Some can be integrating and help hold a family together. Like a regular night when all the family sits at a table, no TV, no mobiles, and talks to each other! Some ways of doing things though can be damaging.

There is a particular Jewish ritual which is observed when a person dies. A part of the clothing is torn. Yet it is also used when a relationship breaks down and it is meant to indicate that the person is as if they were dead. It is a terrible way of saying that a seemingly irreversible break has come in the relationship.

Rituals and patterns which are lifegiving are those which hold us together and reconnect us when we are falling or fallen apart. We can connect again with a pattern of behaviour which draws us into a way of thinking more positively and creatively. Some of the things we do remind us of important connections. Like lifting up our heads to praise God, like kneeling or bowing our heads to reflect inner humility. There is not one way of doing things, but some ways we do things help us to connect with what we are actually doing.

That remembering can come along the way, as we need it, reconnecting our lives. It can also come as a regular reminder which sets a pattern and rhythm for our lives, like using certain prayers week by week and the action when we gather as church unfolding in familiar patterns.

In our first reading today we heard about the establishment of the ritual of the Passover (Exodus 12:1-14). The actions came from a particular event and the escape, the Exodus, from Egypt. But they also became a ritual meal which was deeply infused with memories. To share the meal was to return again into the story and to remember the saving power of God. That event shaped the people of God. It shaped them at the time and it reshaped them every time they remembered through word and action what God had done and is still doing for God's people. Good patterns like that help us to put life into clearer focus.

For us as Christians the Eucharist, Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper has that same connection. A ritual meal where we reconnect in words and actions with the wonderful things that God has done in Jesus, and is doing, and we are fed and nourished and encouraged and challenged and reconnected with God and with each other. We are here celebrating God's actions for us. When we do this it reminds us that our lives are held together by God's grace and love.

In the Gospel reading today (Matthew 18:10-20) Jesus gives us another pattern for life. It is about when things go wrong and relationships get strained and stretched and threaten to be broken. Is there someone who has wandered away? Should we say "It's ok, we still have enough here to fill the rosters and to do the things we are doing."? Might we be tempted to say "Actually I feel more comfortable with the people who are still here, so let's just stick with us who remain."? Instead of focussing only on caring for the people who are left there is a call to reach out to those who have become disconnected. It is a challenge to us. Communities do change and there are lots of reasons why one, or more, might drift away.

Mixing up the metaphor, if we discover that the ones who have drifted away have found another flock where they are being nurtured and cared for and they are happy and blessed, then thank God. If they are still wandering then coming alongside and inviting reconnection is, so Jesus suggests, the way we do things here. Reaching out. Seeing not only the people who are here but also the people who have been and are not at the moment. And reaching out. That is the challenge, to do things in that way.

And when relationships are strained among members of a church community? Well, that never happens of course does it?! We all agree on everything all of the time don't we? Even in the earliest church communities there were tensions. Just read Paul's letters to the Corinthians. We are called to compassion and perseverance and humility and love. There is a challenge that Jesus puts there for us about how we operate as community. When there are tensions we go to each other and talk, drawing on the strength and support of the community around us. We persevere. And when the disagreement is not sorted? Do we shove a relationship aside and cut off from the person? No. The way we do things here, Jesus' way, is to consider even the person at the other end of a strained relationship as someone to be reached out to.

We have another important piece of the way we do things here which brings that challenge of Jesus into focus week by week. The greeting of peace is not intermission in the service. It starts when we celebrate our reconnection with God through the confession and absolution. Then, these words and the action of greeting each other are an invitation into reconciliation with each another. When relationships are strained do you ever feel like avoiding some people at that point in the service? Actually, the person to make sure you DO greet is the person you are most likely to argue with, or who you have argued with. The disagreement may not yet be completely sorted, but that greeting is a sign that we are here together, in God's loving embrace, committed to journey together.

In all the things we do, in the way in which we listen to each other, care for each other, remember and find life-giving, life sustaining meaning, we draw on the example and words and challenge of God, especially focussed for us in the words and life and self-giving of Jesus Christ. May it be so among us.

Amen.

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