

“Relationship in the midst of Rituals”—Isaiah 29:13-14

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “Relationship in the midst of Rituals”, is Isaiah 29:13-14 → *The Lord said: “Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor Me with their lips, while their hearts are far from Me, and their fear of Me is a commandment taught by men, therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.”* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

I remember a worship professor at seminary telling the story about an old mission church which was founded as a Roman Catholic Church but years later became a Lutheran congregation. Naturally the church which was originally built in the 1800's was remodeled numerous times and took on various additions. The members of the congregation had a very peculiar practice following the receiving of the Lord's Supper. After the dismissal, all would exit to the side aisle to go back to their seats. Before turning down the aisle they would stop at the wall of the sanctuary, kneel and make the sign of the cross and go on there way.

One day a visitor in worship asked one of the parishioners, “Why do you stop to genuflect toward that white wall after communion?” The only answer the parishioner could come up with was, “I don’t know. We’ve always done it that way.” The visitor proceeded to ask others only to get the same response. No one knew why they genuflected toward a white sanctuary wall following Communion.

After a tremendous rain storm one night the pastor came to the church the next morning and noticed the wall was wet and the paint was bubbled. After it dried and started to peel they decided that it needed to be fixed. While a number of parishioners were removing the damaged paint and stucco they exposed a mural of Mary, the mother of Jesus. The practice of venerating Mary, so important in the Roman Catholic Church, continued in this Lutheran congregation down through the years, even when her picture was not visible, as they simply followed a traditional practice without knowing why.

Whether or not such a story is true, it does reinforce the fact that we are creatures of habit. It should also makes us take inventory of our own worship practices, traditions and rituals because they have something to do with our relationship with the LORD—good or bad.

Our text records the prophet Isaiah proclaiming the impending judgment of God upon His people with the destruction of Jerusalem, the center of their worship and rituals. This judgment came because

there was a grave problem with their understanding of living in relationship with Yahweh reflected in their worship practices. It wasn't that their worship practices and rituals were bad or disrespectful or distasteful. On the contrary. They were very well done. However, according to verse 13 of our text, they were an expression of useless worship. *The Lord said: ". . . this people draw near with their mouth and honor Me with their lips, while their hearts are far from Me, and their fear of Me is a commandment taught by men."*

Relationship with the LORD is foremost a matter of the heart. Thus, the fear and worship of the LORD is foremost a matter of the heart as well. Psalm 111:1 describes such worship: *Praise the LORD!* (By the way, we speak this phrase throughout our liturgy every time we sing or say "Alleluia" or "Hallelujah." Those are the Greek and Hebrew words for "Praise the LORD!") *Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation.* The rituals we use in our congregational worship are ways to express relationship as God speaks to us through the Word of His gracious covenant of forgiveness and peace in Christ while we speak to Him in praise, adoration and thanksgiving.

However, it is too easy for us sinners to be so focused on the traditions and rituals developed by people that they become the defining identity of worship instead of relationship with God through

faith in Jesus Christ. This was the point Jesus made with the Pharisees when they criticized Him for not *holding to the tradition of the elders*. In Mark 7:6-7 He said to them, “*Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me; in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’*” Stating that they *leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men* (cf. Mark 7:8), He went on to give them a specific example of their hypocrisy. Relationship with the LORD must always be first and foremost in the midst of rituals. Otherwise, it’s simply a worship of something man invents rather than what God has established and commanded.

Some may say that the answer for more meaningful worship is to know why we’re doing what we’re doing. While it is important to know why you’re going through rituals in worship this will not make for true worship either. Notice God’s answer for His “worship-challenged” people in verse 14 of our text: *Behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden*. He will provide a reason to worship which is much deeper than simply people understanding doing what they do. In fact, it will have to be based upon faith in relationship with Him and the

wonderful things He had done for and with us.

What wonderful things! The wonder of His taking on human flesh in the Person of Jesus to work your salvation through His perfect obedience, death and resurrection. The wonder of giving you His Holy Spirit so that you can repent of your sins, come humbly before Him and trust in that perfect work for you. The wonder that, even though it makes no human sense, your heart basks in the faithfulness of God's love for you all the way into eternity. Since such wonders in the Person & Work of Christ Jesus blow our *wisdom* and *discernment* out of the water you will not be able to create true worship by studying it, systematizing it and packaging it. True worship can only happen as the Holy Spirit works faith in your heart so that you approach the LORD with your *whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation*.

Jesus said it this way in John 4:24 → *God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth*. Our true worship begins in the same place that Isaiah's message to God's people 2700 years ago began: Face the truth that you are living in sin and idolatry. Repent of your sins and come before the LORD with a humble heart which desires the Holy Spirit to express praise, adoration and thanksgiving through you **because of the relationship with Jesus in the midst of your rituals**. Come to submit to His Word with the

desire to leave this place and live in obedience to Him, not simply to analyze God's Word or our rituals.

Colossians 3:16 says of our worship: *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.* Notice we are to *let the word of Christ **dwell in us richly***, not just let it flow over our lips. Only when *the word of Christ dwells in us richly* can we have hearts that fear, love and trust in God above all things. Only when *the word of Christ dwells in us richly* can we teach and admonish *one another in all wisdom*—the wisdom which flows from submission to the Holy Spirit, not manipulation of a ritual. Only when *the word of Christ dwells in us richly* can we sing *psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, **with thankfulness in our hearts** to God*, not criticism from our lips.

We approach God's Word and worship on the basis of His relationship He has established with us in Jesus, sealed with His Holy Spirit. We approach man's traditions and rituals in worship on the basis of His relationship He has established with us in Jesus, sealed with His Holy Spirit. It is relationship with Yahweh in the midst of rituals with a desire to obey His commands even outside of the public performance of our rituals here, that is, in the daily vocations, conversations, tasks and relationships of our lives.

This is why Yahweh stressed obedience **on the basis of relationship** when He brought them out of Egypt before laying down any rituals. The LORD said in Jeremiah 7:22-23 → *For in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices (i.e. their worship rituals). But this command I gave them: “Obey My voice, and **I will be your God, and you shall be My people.** (i.e. relationship) And walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you (i.e. obedience based upon relationship).*

When it comes to rituals in worship many people would agree that it is very important for one to know why you're doing what you're doing. It is more important to come knowing Whom you are worshiping in humble submission, letting the Word of Christ dwell in your richly, praising, adoring and thanking God for His wonderful work of forgiveness and salvation in Jesus! Amen.

*Praise the LORD! Sing to the LORD a new song,
His praise in the assembly of the godly!*

(Psalm 149:1)

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