

**Spiritual, But Not Religious?: Going into the Un/Known**  
**Ezekiel 36: 24-29a; Luke 24: 13-35**  
**April 21, 2013 (Third Sunday after Easter)**  
**Rev. Dr. Charles Parker**

## **I Introduction**

My family watched the original *Karate Kid* movie recently and we were reminded of that classic scene when the karate teacher in the movie, Mr. Miyagi, is training the young man who is the hero of the story, and he is training him by giving him a lot of jobs to do around the house. So there's the classic wax on, wax off job that he gives him and painting the fence. He does this for some time until the young man, Daniel, finally explodes at him and says, "You're just giving me chores to do. I'm not learning anything about what you promised to teach me." Mr. Miyagi at that point very patiently explains to him that all of the things that he has been doing have been preparing him for the training that he is receiving. It's been about learning muscle memory in a very elemental way.

One of the complaints that people who self-identify as spiritual but not religious often level against the church is that the ritual of the church doesn't connect with them. It feels artificial, and repetitive, and irrelevant. Our children, had they not scampered out to I guess go to work on the youth project, would say that it's boring often. But what we are doing here in the rituals of the church, from baptism to Eucharist to our regular Sunday gatherings, is doing what Daniel was as he prepared in *The Karate Kid* -- we're learning muscle memory. The ritual life of the church is about learning the movements that make the art of the spiritual possible.

We're in the midst of a sermon series on the dialogue between spirituality and

religion. This morning I want to talk about this whole idea of ritual in the life of faith. This feels particularly important today after the week that we have all just had in which we've had a terrorist bombing at the Boston Marathon. We've had poisoned letters sent to our elected officials. We've had an explosion at a fertilizer plant in Texas that was so massive it felt like an earthquake. We had an actual earthquake in China, and all rounded out by a running gun battle in the suburbs of Boston. Frankly, if we had seen all these in a movie, we would shake our heads and say that's just a little over the top, but life gets a little over the top sometimes.

## **II. Living into Ritual**

One of the pieces of the rituals of our church is to help orient us in the midst of what feels like chaos, so that we can start to observe where the Holy Spirit is moving even at times when it doesn't seem possible for the Holy Spirit to move. Harvard theologian Harvey Cox writes, "Rituals are enactments - in song, story, visual representation, and gesture - of the narratives that inform a people's identity." They're the stories that shape how we view the world. What happens here, Professor Cox argues, is less about learning new information, which is how we like to process things, and more about living into the stories that we know and getting to know them ever deeper and better as a way of helping us create order in the midst of chaos. You see, when there's a crisis, you don't have time to think. You act instinctually. What the rituals of our church are about is teaching us how to react instinctually in a way that is focused on God and where the Holy Spirit might be leading us.

Congregationalist Pastor Lillian Daniel tells this story, "I remember a family new

to our church whose grade school-aged kids had only had a year of Sunday school under their belts. In the middle of what was his second Christmas pageant rehearsal ever, the little boy cried out in total exasperation, ‘Do you mean to tell me that we’re doing exactly the same story we did last year?’” Today she writes that youngster has grown and has been blessed by the repetition that gives his chaotic days meaning. In a world that demands that everything be a one-time only original production, the church remains a place to remember that there is someone much better than we are at original creations. This, of course, is what we just experienced in Caitlin’s baptism and Ezekiel is writing about baptism in this wonderful passage where the prophet talks about sprinkling us with clean water and making us clean, giving us new hearts and new minds.

Now, when I just baptized Caitlin, nothing magic happened. She was not miraculously transformed from the child that she had been half an hour ago. But what happens in that process is that we all together tell the story of our faith to each other. We watched the ritual of the water being poured and sprinkled on her head and we are reminded of God’s outpouring of grace on us. We remembered that that was us one day as we reaffirm who we are so that over and over again as we do baptisms, we invite ourselves back into the story anew as we welcome a new member.

Professor of religion, Karen Armstrong, writes, “Religious people find it hard to explain how their rituals and practices work, just as a skater may not be fully conscious of the physical laws that enable her to glide over the ice on a thin blade.” You see, in our scientific hyper-rational worldview, we so often use knowledge to try to control what is happening in the world. We have done that in very powerful, and successful, and

positive ways. We were talking in the Great Hall session today about the enormous strides that we've taken over the last 100 years in the eradication of a whole range of diseases that were massive killers just decades ago and are virtually nonexistent today. That worldview has a purpose and is a valuable gift, but there's also a piece of who we are that delights in mystery and understands the futility of trying to understand all of what the world is about. This is why music has always been such an inseparable part of the rituals of the church because music, like religion, is always about hinting at something that is beyond our ability to clearly articulate. Music is a way of knowing that defies logical analysis, an empirical proof. It is about truth that doesn't necessarily translate into the structures of logic and science.

### **III. From Ritual to Mystery**

Rituals always point us in the direction of the mystery. Harvey Cox writes, "Faith always begins with awe in the face of mystery." We're always looking at that thing that is just outside of our reach but it is beckoning to us. The bush men of Australia say that the rock paintings that are part of their worship life depict the world beyond this one, behind this one that we see with our eyes. What our rituals are about is getting a glimpse of the world behind the one that we perceive with our eyes.

In the Middle Ages, the mass was a symbolic reenactment of Jesus' life and death and resurrection. The fact that the people couldn't necessarily follow it because they didn't know Latin didn't really matter on some level. The priests often recited the mass in sort of a quiet undertone so people often didn't even hear what they were saying. But through the solemn silence and through the liturgical drama, the acts that

they saw, and the beauty of the music, the congregation is led into a mental space that is separate from ordinary life so that our rituals, on some level, reflect our theology, our religious ideas. But on a much more basic level, our rituals actually shape our theology. They give us our religious ideas. They're in a place where we explore intellectually what we are experiencing physically.

This is what our Gospel lesson is about from Luke. This passage takes place on Easter Sunday. It's the story of two of Jesus' disciples who had lived outside of Jerusalem but hadn't been able to go home over the weekend because of the limits on travel during the Sabbath. So they had been in Jerusalem on Saturday. They had left for home early Sunday morning just after they had heard the reports from the women coming back from the tomb and they're trying to understand it all. They're trying to get their heads around what this might mean, and they meet this stranger who engages them in conversation. Then, as they tell their story, the stranger starts to interpret the Scriptures that they knew so well and helped them see something different happening. But that was still an intellectual process.

The story ends with this very powerful statement about the Eucharist, about Holy Communion, because Luke's words in this passage are exactly the words that Luke uses to describe the Last Supper. Jesus takes the bread and He gives thanks and He breaks the bread and He gives it to His disciples. In that ritual action, their eyes are opened and all of a sudden they understood all of the things that they already knew. Then they go forth to act.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Harvey Cox is out of a Baptist background, and he says, “Like other people in a host of different traditions, I was first exposed to the tradition in which I find myself through stories and rituals. As tiny children, we crayoned Bible characters in coloring books and stuck their cutouts on flannel boards. If I close my eyes now, I can still see them. We chirped little songs about them, some of which I still remember. As we got older, we sang cantatas and choir anthems and spirituals about them. We pulled on worn bathrobes and acted their escapades in church plays. By the time we were ready to leave Sunday school, these sagas had become permanent features in the topography of our imagination.” I love that line. “These sagas had become permanent features in the topography of our imagination.” They did exactly what rituals are supposed to do.

Christians throughout history and, frankly, most other faith traditions are often rather deliberately hesitant to speak in too detailed a way about who God is because we want to hold the mystery of God in front of us, and we recognize our own limited ability to unpack that mystery. At some point we understand that God exceeds all of our thoughts and can only be known through practice. Religion, therefore, is not primarily something that we think. Religion is not about what we believe, a set of dogmatic statements that we subscribe to. Religion is something we do. We’re doing it right now, right here. The stories that we internalized would not have any effect if all we are called to do is believe them. They're essentially a program of action.

Being here teaches us to see the world through eyes of wonder and awe. Being here is where we learn to express gratitude for the gifts that we have been given. Being here is where we practice generosity with those gifts. Being here is where we

experience how to give and receive forgiveness. Sometimes it's going to feel repetitive and sometimes it's going to feel boring, but that's how we develop the muscle memory for those gifts. Wax on, wax off.

Amen.