

## REVERENCE AND RITUAL

Texts on Sunday, June 10, 2012

*Numbers 11: 10-17; Acts 1: 15-26*

RIVERSIDE IS PRACTICING some ancient rituals today. The service of worship is itself a ritual with an ancient lineage, but some of what we are doing today we do rather seldom. Your baptisms by immersion follow the pattern of the earliest church, to bring alive the meaning of baptism into Christ's death, that you might know life like his. Confirmation has a long history too. As churches grew numerous across the lands of Europe and Asia Minor, bishops could no longer be present for every baptism. To any particular village, then, they would travel only occasionally and there confirm the baptisms performed since their last visit. Voting is a ritual too. In a little more than an hour, the members of the Church will gather to consider for approval a slate of candidates willing to serve as the search committee for the next senior minister. Rituals of selecting servants for the people go all the way back to the beginning of civilization. We have just heard two stories from the Bible about choosing men to serve the people of God.

Rituals get a mixed reception in our time. Some people dismiss them contemptuously. "We're just going through rituals," people say, meaning they feel no meaning in the actions, but go through the motions to get what they want from the authorities. Thinking about public meetings, the frustration goes higher. "They never get anything done," someone fumes. As for religious rituals, the world outside smirks: "Do they really think those rituals are real—like someone's watching from above to see if it's done right?"

The fact is that in the Protestant tradition of the Christian faith, we do not teach that the sacraments "do anything" in heaven. God does not save the baptized child or ignore the unbaptized, or put a person who misses communion on a watch list. We don't believe that. Water brought from the Jordan River in a little bottle might be a nifty souvenir of your trip, but it won't make a better baptism. Actually, "special water" would turn a baptism into something disturbing or trivial, implying that some magic quality is what makes rituals "really" work, while other do not. As for the rituals surrounding the election or ordination or installation of ministers, we don't believe the rituals make them more holy or important or powerful. It would be easier to say in one sentence what religion is about if we believed in magic. But all that is dead and gone for those mature in the faith. So what do these rituals mean?

Here is a story from far outside of religion to help us think more deeply about ritual. In the 1960s, for very many Americans, respect for our government was severely eroded by the Vietnam War. The presidents and their

advisers lied to the American people year after year in order to justify the destruction of the Vietnamese nation. I thank God that we failed so spectacularly in our awful mission. The cost was high. Along with millions of my generation, I grew ashamed of the name “American.” Mostly, the generations of our parents and grandparents were angered by our bitterness. As a result, national rituals—displaying the flag, singing the national anthem, a Memorial Day parade—became battlegrounds of fiercely contested value. With regard to America, as Rev. William Sloane Coffin put it, most of us were either unloving critics or uncritical lovers. I was of the former description.

In 1974, as the Vietnam War still dragged toward its ignoble end and as the President was cornered by his Watergate lies into resigning his office, I was traveling around Europe by the tip of my thumb. I speak a number of European languages, and I did not mind that few took me for an American. One late spring day—I don’t recall what moved me to it—I went by city bus from Arnhem in the Netherlands to visit a battlefield of the Second World War. An immense cemetery was now spread across the rolling land. The American flag flew at the gate, which was staffed by Americans. I think only American soldiers lay buried there. I had never stood in a military cemetery.

I was alone. I began to walk among the markers, aware that somewhere in America, a father, a mother, a lover, brother, or wife was still remembering the person hovering in the name of almost all who lay there. And every one of those shining white stones, whether it bore the shape of the cross or the star of David, was of the same height exactly. If you stooped down to look across the field, the whole assembly of stones gathered at one instant together to show how carefully all were placed. The distance between the stones was set exactly, all alike, to the fraction of an inch; and the rows were of one width, perfect and straight. And the grass was cut just so, as cleanly at the base of each small pillar as out in the wide lane. While walking, my eye was startled again and again with the perfect, unexpected alignments. vertically, horizontally, diagonally the stones seemed to sweep to attention.

Every part of my own body was suffused with feeling for these rituals of honor: for the extreme care given to the setting of these stones, not once only, but year upon year righting those that sagged in the earth, cleaning, cutting. I was aware of the great price of that care, offered in silent testimony to the unmeasurable price of all that was lost on that battlefield. I was not ashamed to be an American that day. I was profoundly glad that we—there is the key word—that we were giving attention to the dead of the war in a manner so beautiful, simple, and elegant that something eternal could be felt through the things of stone and grass.

A ritual empty of feeling is hard to bear. One wonders, *Do they really*

*think this makes a difference?* But when feeling attends a ritual, connecting you to hopes and values so deep they cannot be fully named, then an attitude of reverence has come over you. Reverence makes all the difference in a ritual. I would not presume to describe all that is woven into reverence, but it has always at least this character, that you are aware that you personally are involved in a great drama, what in a recent sermon we called “history that matters;” that you are not separate from the tragedies or the genius of your people, but bound together across time and edgeless space. That you are one. That we are we. That it would feel like an offense to use the word “them” against them; and you come to peace, not with evil, but with your being and theirs. That is a little of what reverence in a ritual feels like.

A little while ago, when you young people were baptized, I recalled the counsel of the church through all the ages, “Remember your baptism.” Mine was sprinkled on my tiny head when I was but months old. What is there to remember? This, and reverently: That we humans are a humble creature, bound to learn and accept our bodies, be they tiny, young, old, strong, or weak. And that we are all astounded by the weight of our awareness of life, of our desire for more, and of terrible energies we have not mastered, and of others we can guide like a sail before the wind. That baptism, mine, yours, is a simple, wordless way of washing you over with the knowledge that you are part of us. We know how hard it is to walk this way—really; and how wonderful, too. Be held in the body, in the body of Christ. In this way, your baptism has blessed us all again today with reverence in a ritual.

Now, a little later, the church will be voting. That seems to many an action too ordinary for reverence. But I would counter that thought. The high degree of non-participation in voting, whether in the church or in America generally, has something to do with the lack of feeling we have for the ritual of choosing servants. Now, it is not a simple thing to engender genuine feeling where none exists. But it happens, as it happened to that young man on the battlefield of Arnhem many years ago. What is wanting is a changed perspective, a zooming out of the lens of our concern from the little frame—I have more important things to do—to the big picture: Ah, my God, here the world turns; here history matters; here, twelve souls stand willing to serve, to sift the sands of many stories of many men and women, to bring a new leader before this church in due season. You may have your own gripe about how they did this last time and how they did that, but your own gripe sounds always the same. It is a ritual without feeling, without reverence. It never takes you to a new place. Get some distance from your own gripe. Pull the lens back in a spirit of reverence in a ritual.

Feel rather the water pouring a round you in the great stream where you

stand. Feel what it is for Moses to want help in governing. Feel what it is to call a man or woman to accept this burden here at Riverside; to know even now that this great institution is so composed that your future servant will certainly cry out, at least a few times in the course of the years, “Did I conceive all these people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom’, to the land that you promised us?” Stand then with God in the meeting today with reverence for the ritual.

When you vote for twelve today, remember what it was for the disciples, minus dead Judas, to desire to fulfill their number and again be twelve—for magic, and not for old time’s sake, but to stand for the union and communion of all tribes scattered across all the earth. Notice too how the Bible teaches by silence, for there is a record of a spiritual evolution here. The men of old put no trust in voting. In the Exodus story, only the one man Moses is charged with finding seventy, and God promises to spread a little of Moses’ spirit on the many. But in choosing the twelfth disciple, eleven select two, between whom, they hope, God will intervene in the casting of lots to indicate the true servant. Yet in Acts 6, the disciples are fully ready to use their simple show of hands to determine servants for the church. They are trusting that the will of God can be made manifest through their own vote, and that God’s spirit is already in each person, whose vocation to serve can be discerned by the assembled church. Here, we see that even now, we are standing in the stream of history and evolution, from which God is drawing us up into the practices of self-government, through reverence in our rituals.

Enter the voting hall today then with a feeling for the unfolding and awakening of the eye of Spirit in all humanity. We humans are a young species on earth, still a waking, wailing baby, to whom God is saying, *Use your words. Use your voice. Use your vote.* Come and vote, and may you feel reverence in the ritual.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

© 2012 Stephen H. Phelps

*The Riverside Church  
in the City of New York*

[At the end of this sermon, Rev. Phelps read the poem *Lines on History*, from the volume *The Dancers of Riverside Park*, by Peggy L. Shriver]