

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

Raising Ebenezer

Acts 6.1-6; 1 Samuel 7.12

June 11, 2006, Russ Dean

A Homily for a “Service of Ritual and Blessing,” including High School Graduation, Youth Mission Trip Commissioning, and Deacon Emeritus recognition.



The boys gathered at home, two from college joining the two still in high school. The father had left instructions and his sons worked to follow them, carefully. He was to be buried on the family estate, in Beaufort, SC, in a casket made by his own sons. Finally losing a long bout with cancer, the father’s plans were intended to bring his sons together in their grief. They had often worked together. So they would work together, again. They had often laughed together. Surely, even with the sting of death so close upon them, those four boys told stories, shared memories, and laughed again. Those moments, when four sons gathered to keep a father’s final wish, must surely have been powerful for young men, still being formed in their character and thought.

Mark Sanford, the Governor of South Carolina, was a senior at Furman and the president of the student body in my freshman year. As the president of the incoming class, I shared a seat with him on the student council, and I knew his brother Bill, who was also a student there. Their story has always impressed me.¹ At first, it impressed me as strange, difficult, maybe a little morbid. (Building your father’s casket?) But the more I have experienced in life, the more I believe in “Raising Ebenezer.” Raising up specific stones of specific memory. Creating rituals that allow us to mark specific moments in life as transcendent. That is, as events that are greater than just the moment.

¹ I knew Mark and Bill Sanford only tangentially and did not hear this story directly from them, so some of the incidentals may be inaccurate (were there four sons?, etc...) The story as I heard it conveyed the father’s wish that his sons build his casket, and, I believe, came with specific drawings/plans for the box.

For in these rituals, we find God.

So it is the job of the church, not just to be a place to help us raise Kalah Burke² (Anne Marie and Barry, can you believe she's really graduating from High School?), but to help us raise our own Ebenezers – to mark all of life as holy, by creating specific rituals of blessing, to recognize God *above all and through all and in all* (Ephesians 4.6).

After a great battle, in which the Israelite people gave thanks to God for victory, Samuel took an ordinary stone and set it up and named it “Stone of Help” – in his own language – *Ebenezer* (1 Samuel 7.12³). It was a marker, calling the people to look back with specific eyes. “O God our help in ages past... our hope for years to come...”

In the early church the widows and orphans were not being fed, and the Apostles had devoted themselves to “*prayer and to serving the word,*” so they called out the first deacons – servants in the likeness of Jesus, who washed his disciples feet – as servers of tables (Acts 6). But it was not enough just to say, “Mary McGowan, we want you to serve...”⁴ No, they knew the importance of creating a ritual, of raising up an Ebenezer all their own. So they gathered them together, praying over them, and laying their hands on them in a simple, but powerful gesture of blessing. Rituals need not be complicated. It is amazing how powerful is the simple act of touch, when sanctified by the presence of a community, and by the invoking of the Spirit of God. Those who have knelt here in ordination, felt those hands and heard those prayers, know just that.

² Kalah was our only High School senior this year.

³ Many will recognize this text from the familiar hymn, “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”: “Here I raise mine Ebenezer, hither by thy help I’m come; and I hope by thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home...”

⁴ We recognized Mary for nearly 30 years of service as a deacon. Ordained in 1978, she was in the second class of women to be called as deacons in Park Road Baptist Church.

A few years ago, I spoke with a young man who had grown up in the church, but who had, for various reasons, left the faith. The whole “idea of God” simply did not work for him. He came to talk to me because he had recently been to a wedding, and as he tried to explain his experience, this ordinarily-eloquent young man began to stammer: “I don’t know... there was just... something going on there... There was something that I felt that was... special. More than... just... the formality of a service... I’m sure that I’ll be getting married one day and, even though I’m... not a ‘believer,’ I really want that for my marriage, too.”

I explained to him that I believe there is more than formality going on at a wedding... and at funerals... and in baptisms... and when we break bread and share the cup together... and when we read the names of our deceased... and when we hold up our little ones and proclaim, “...God is with you.”... and when we send off our high school graduates and commission our people for mission service and when we recognize an entire lifetime of dedicated service with just an inexpensive little plaque and a few words of thanksgiving. Yes, I think there is more going on.

I think it is God “going on” – and going on with us.

It is God who makes our life more than just the formality of our biology. It is God who makes our living more than just the formality of our sociology or our economy or our nationality. And we must find, and continue to find ways to recognize the goings of on God in our midst. Mahan Siler, who preacher here back in February, has written about the importance of ritual, and he says:

The reality of community generates the desire, if not, demand for rituals. Have you noticed? A profound experience of belonging or reconciliation

must be ritualized in some way. If no rituals are readily available we will improvise something on the spot.⁵

We've shared some of our own rituals: gathering every Friday night for three decades to play Bridge together – is a ritual. Cutting the lawn every single Friday for a lifetime at the same time as your neighbor, so you can share one cold beer and a barrel of laughs afterwards – is a ritual. Gathering year after year in the same crowded house on the same beach with all of the family (why would you do that!?) – is a ritual. Reading the Christmas story in the midst of all the chaos... These are our rituals – created whether or not we're aware of it, in order to say to our own souls:

“There is something more going on here!”

The little girl walked out onto the beach for the first time in her life, and she was speechless. Spellbound. So awe-inspired at the vastness of an endless ocean that she, literally, could not take it in. Overwhelmed, she turned her back on that frightening expanse, and she knelt with her bucket facing the shore. Digging a hole that filled quickly with water, she had her own little ocean in which to play. It was all she could handle at the moment.

So it is with our rituals. When we speak a litany... lay on a hand.... raise a child... dip our bread... We are carving out for our little minds, awash in the vast ocean of the mystery of God, a little moment, a brief glimpse, a bite-size portion of the divine.

Most of the time it is all we can handle.

So, may it be so. Amen!

⁵ Mahan Siler, *Letters to Nancy: reflections on pastoral ministry*, p.169.