

Proper 17B  
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### Craving The Three Rs

Our summer days are winding down and with their ending comes a new routine for many of us of school days, soccer practices, earlier bedtimes and longer work hours. Gone are the lazy and carefree days of summer. And even though we will miss these days, it is always nice to get back into the routine. Those of us who have or have had school aged children recall those back to school orientations where the teacher gets up and tells us about how important rhythm, ritual and routine are for the development of our children. Whether at age five or fifty, I think, as human beings we all crave the three Rs. They offer us a pattern to our lives. They make us feel safe and comfortable and with them we know what to expect.

I remember a former co-worker telling me the story about his son's first week of elementary school. School was not a new experience for Ben. He had attended pre-school and then all day kindergarten. But somehow first grade was different. It symbolized that he was no longer a little boy. He was anxious and even afraid of this change in his young life. And so each day that first week as my co-worker was helping his son dress and get ready for school, Ben kept taking off his clothes, putting his pajamas back on and getting back under the covers of his bed. Ben was not about to go to school. My coworker said each day as he pushed Ben onto the bus, he worried about how his day would go. Of course, by Friday

afternoon Ben couldn't stop talking about what a great week he had had and how wonderful his new school and teachers were. When something disrupts our usual patterns of living, we can become anxious. We don't like the unknown and are skeptical of change. For many faithful churchgoers change is frightening. "But, we've always done it this way. And besides, it is working so well. Why would we ever consider doing it differently?" are the familiar litanies repeated among church members. There are moments when the changes in our patterns and routines cause us to want to put our pajamas back on and curl up in bed rather than go on with our day.

In our Gospel passage this morning Jesus is being confronted by the Pharisees and scribes for doing things differently, for disregarding an established practice. The Pharisaic tradition of washing one's hands before eating was an ancient one. It had become customary for the followers of this tradition to engage in ritualized cleansing, such as washing hands before eating, as well as many other daily acts in order to sanctify those very ordinary things in life. In doing this the faithful were asking God to make holy what was common – very much like what we do when we gather around the dinner table and say a blessing over our meal.

However, by the time of Jesus' day the whole system of ritual and law observance had become rigid and lacked any substantive meaning. It had become an empty observance. The Pharisees, Jesus countered, seemed more concerned with keeping up the practices than actually following God's commandments. "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. . ." The Pharisees were so afraid that if they did not observe the rituals

and obey the laws exactly as they had been before, that if anything changed in their practices, the whole tradition might just die out and they would be failing their God and their faith. And so what was intended to strengthen their covenant with their God became a substitute for that life-giving relationship.

In disregarding the set customs and traditions of his elders Jesus maintained that the relationship with his Father must never take a back seat to anything. What must be primary in one's faith is loving God and loving one's neighbor. If we are honest with ourselves, Jesus actions and words are as disturbing to us and to our ways as they were to the religious leaders of his day. As much as we crave the three Rs, Jesus says they can never be a substitute for what is most important. Ritual and routine can not become the God whom we worship. *But we've always done it this way* is not a good argument for maintaining the status quo.

Together, we have embarked on a new journey as the people of St. Peter's Church. This journey is both exciting and a little scary. As much as we want stability and even routine in the aftermath of the interim-period, we realize that we still must live in a time of transition, a time of change. In fact, if we want to continue to grow in our spiritual lives, in our mission as a church and in our understanding of God's vision for us as a people, then we must fight the temptation to do things as we have always done them. We are after all people of the resurrection, people called to transformation. In order to write a new chapter in the story of St. Peter's we must both honor where we've been while at the same time looking ahead to the transformation which awaits us.

The amazing thing, friends, is that when we have the courage to put aside our fears of change and our anxiety about the unknown we will come to find a new found freedom in our relationship with our God and with one another. We find that no longer do we need to curl up in our beds and put the covers over our heads instead of facing the changes to our routines and patterns. And finally, when we are able stop clinging to the way things used to be, we will be surprised by our God who is constantly transforming us and our community into a people more intimately bound in love to one another and to our Creator.