

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I've been thinking recently about the sequence of actions I engage in each morning – the preparations I make for the upcoming day, sometimes before my brain is even fully activated. Shaving always comes first, unless it's a shumpy day at home...this, as a matter of fact, is what got me thinking about it. My spouse asked me not long ago why I shaved first and then showered second; his practice is exactly the opposite. And, to be honest, I hadn't actually thought a lot about it for quite some time – over the course of years, as with much of the rest of my morning routine, I've made a series of decisions about what was best done in which order – brushing teeth is always last, on the way out the door. The question inspired a memory – my grandpa telling me about his routine, in which he said he splashed his face with warm (but not hot!) water for a minute before applying the lather...it worked better this way, he said, and my experience confirms that fact. After the stubble is cleared away – or, the spare semblance of a beard that our family genetics allows – there is one last warm water rinse followed by cold water, to close the pores. This was another of my grandpa's suggestions, and I've incorporated it into my routine. I'm relatively sure that most people experience some variation on this:

And so, as I say, I've been thinking a bit about what a good thing it is to have this sequence of morning actions in place – I am so used to this particular order of actions that I engage in them almost without thinking about what I'm doing. At

5:30 or 6 o'clock in the morning, let's be real, I'm barely able to keep from bumping into objects, much less think through what needs to come next. And thank God for it: the preparations I make when first getting out of bed are incredibly important to the rest of my day.

The genius of ritual – bringing what's necessary to our bodies and minds into a memorized daily practice, until we know it in our bones – is that we then can get done what needs to be done, whether our brains are in a place where they can think it through or not. It's a codifying of something we've thought through at one time, and it provides an efficiency in the sense that we don't have to think it through every single day – freeing our minds to think about the day ahead, the concerns of the moment, or perhaps even nothing at all.

The liturgy, I think, functions in a similar way – so, too, do daily practices of meditation, prayer, contemplation, the Rosary – people across faiths and cultures have seen value in taking the at-times seemingly abstract matter of faith in God, and translated it into practices that enrich, support, and sustain human life. Ritual recognizes a certain reality of human existence – that even the most important things, perhaps especially the important things, can be easily forgotten or overlooked in the din of day-to-day existence.

Many of us, before we eat, say a simple blessing – the words themselves are not important, but they signify something deeply important: we give God thanks for the gifts he has given us, the food we are going to enjoy and also every other good thing. The reminder, then, is that all good things come from God – as with so many other prayers, it's less about telling God something he doesn't already know than it is about reminding ourselves who is the Source of all good gifts. “In

other words, it's a way of sanctifying the ordinary; acknowledging that food, and that time, is holy. This is one of our motivations for saying a blessing before a meal."

And so when Jesus rebukes the Pharisees in today's reading from Mark, accusing them of hypocrisy, we must also recognize that the root of the Pharisees insistence on maintaining ritual cleanliness – they were insisting upon it because they believed it was such an important part of showing their love for God. But Jesus recognized that, somewhere along the way, the Pharisees' ritual had become disconnected entirely from their hearts – they honored God in practice, but not in attitude. They were, in effect, saying one thing and doing another.

What got mixed up for the Pharisees is that they THOUGHT that their rituals were done for the sake of God – that somehow, by keeping these practices wholly and entirely, God would be pleased. What they didn't realize is that "we don't engage in ritual for God's sake, but for our own." God desires a willing and open heart – and religious or spiritual practices help us to keep our hearts and minds focused in the right direction. Prayer and liturgy and other kinds of religious ritual are incredibly helpful to us as human beings, living in an evermore cluttered and noisy world – helping us to remember always the source of all that is good in our lives, and helping us to turn our hearts more and more toward God – spilling over into the way we live, until our lives overflow with God's love and goodness and yes, even good works. Jesus is recognizing here that ritual is important, but only in service of the larger good – a deepening, growing relationship with the God who created us to be just as we are.

In a few minutes, we will engage in one of those ancient practices – indeed, one of the two sacraments in which we are commanded to participate by Christ's word and example. The Book of Common Prayer tells us that a sacrament is “an outward sign of an inward grace” – a fancy way of saying that sacraments are both form and function at the same time. They symbolize a deeper spiritual reality – in this case, welcoming a new member into the household of God – but even as it symbolizes this new beginning, it also effects what it symbolizes. What we recognize in a sacrament such as baptism is a new world being born – the world that will constitute a whole life, the life of Morgan Barbee – with all of the promise and hope and possibility contained within it -- and proclaiming the Holy Spirit already at work in that new world – in her life, in her home, and in her family.

Growing up, I got to see my dad baptize quite a number of babies and a few adults, and he always gave the same instruction at each baptism: “This isn't magic,” he'd say, reminding the parents that there was a responsibility on their part to continue the work begun by participation in baptism – particularly for parents who were making these promises on behalf of their own child – that raising them to know and love God wouldn't happen just on its own. That they would need to actively engage with the process for it to succeed.

And maybe that's where I disagree just a little bit with my dad – respectfully, of course – but I think there IS a kind of magic in baptism. If we believe a sacrament effects what it signifies, then there is something supernatural and even magical about it. As we all, together, in this community of Jesus followers, renew our promises, and welcome young Morgan into God's family, we recognize through

these humble symbols of water, oil, and flame that the Holy Spirit is indeed at work in Morgan's life – it's already happening, and it is a significant moment.

But I think it can be said that it is not **ONLY** magic. It's not something that can be "one-and-done" as they say – this is not a complete act in and of itself. It is rather a new beginning, and a huge responsibility. As you make these promises today – "I will, with God's help," make those words your own prayer, a reminder to yourself and a pledge to God, that this work is possible – and **ONLY** possible – with the help and presence and sustaining work of God.

Amen.