

Sermon for Sunday, September 10, 2023

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“Focus on Form”

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Decorah, Iowa

Exodus 12:1-14: [Click here to read story for today.](#)

Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

These days I'm learning a lot from watching the eleven amazing Good Shepherd youth who run cross country. You inspired me again yesterday at the All-American meet. I'm also learning from an ultramarathoner. Usually, I'd question the sanity of anyone who willingly runs 100 miles at a time. Yet, this particular runner, MaryAnn McKibben Dana, is also a wise pastor, mother, and author of a beautiful book called *Hope: A User's Manual*.

Many of Dana's insights about hope come out of parenting a child struggling with severe depression. Others come from long runs that often feel to her like slogs through deep mud. In one chapter, she shares the wisdom that **beginning runners tend to focus on the pain, intermediate runners often focus on the distance, advanced runners learn to focus on form.** In running and in life, Dana's found that rather than fixating on what hurts, or how much farther she has to go, **it's best to stay focused on the things that help her keep moving through it all.**

That resonates with me. When I ran cross country, I found it unhelpful when well meaning, kind people would cheer, *you're halfway there*. What? I have to endure all that again?! My coach's reminder to lift up my head and move my arms - to focus on form - was much more helpful.

In our Old Testament story today, I hear a call to God's people to focus on form.

The people are experiencing tremendous pain, enduring slavery under a murderous dictator. God's working to set them free, but they have a long distance to travel, both physically and spiritually, before they can fully experience that freedom. Focusing on the pain or the distance could immobilize them. Instead, God gives them a form, a ritual, something concrete as a focus in this long, painful slog into freedom. God actually gives them this ritual to remember what's happened, before it happens. Before God takes a final drastic action to set the people free, God tells them how to mark the Passover of the Lord, year after year. God gives them a form.

Maybe God knows the horror involved in setting them free could completely overwhelm them, as the firstborn children and animals of the Egyptians will all be killed. That is terrible. It raises all sorts of questions about God and suffering and how God brings justice in a world so marred by brokenness and injustice. It's important to wrestle with such questions, but there's much about God's ways that is beyond our grasp, out of reach. In such times, rituals, forms, and practices can be incredibly helpful. They provide a container to acknowledge pain and what is incomprehensible in our world, and yet not fixate on it.

The Passover ritual includes eating bitter herbs to remember the bitterness of slavery and questions to help ponder the great distance between our broken world and the life God longs for us all to know. Yet the main focus of Passover is on forms, ways of being, that will help the people move

out of slavery, through the wilderness, and into the promised land. They're told to make sure everyone can participate. If a household is too small to afford its own lamb, it should join with another. Also, if a lamb is too expensive, you can use an older sheep or a goat. That is, include everyone. Divide the lamb in such a way that everyone gets some. That is, share. The whole congregation shall assemble. Community matters. Put the lamb's blood on the doorpost of your homes as a sign for you. That is, remember what God has done for you. Be dressed and ready. That is, keep moving through this all.

These forms, and this ritual, have sustained the Jewish people throughout the centuries. What forms and rituals sustain us as God's people, as a congregation? In the face of climate change we could get overwhelmed, but our practices of caring for God's creation and becoming carbon neutral have given us a way of being that helps. When COVID-19 hit and our building closed, nothing made sense, but practices and rituals provided a way through. We knew we needed to worship, so we moved to YouTube. We needed to care for each other, so we established a system of Shepherds and Flocks. We needed to serve others, so we supported the Decorah Mutual Aid Network. We needed the sacrament, so we did communion outside and together over Zoom.

These forms provided safe space where we could acknowledge the pain, acknowledge how far we have to go as a society, and yet not get overwhelmed. We could keep moving through it all together. Practices and rituals continue to do this for us as a congregation and as individuals. When things are hard and all you can feel is pain, when you don't know how you'll move through, the community prays and practices on your behalf. The rituals the community does carry you. At other times, your practice does the same for others.

Today we're blessing Confirmation students. The whole process of Confirmation is about forms, practices, and rituals that help you, help us, move through life together as God's people in helpful ways. You who take part in Confirmation all have struggles, you all have questions, we all do. In Confirmation class we acknowledge all of that. Faith in God doesn't fix everything. It doesn't provide all the answers. Instead, faith helps us to participate, *together*, in how God is working to free us all: to free us from fear, despair, isolation, greed, injustice, sin; free us from what gets in the way of the life God wants everyone to experience.

God has given us rituals to help us move through what's hard and experience abundant life in the midst of it. It shall be "**for you**", God says over and over in the Passover instructions. **For you**, we are told four times during our communion liturgy.

We have what we need to not get overwhelmed by pain or by how far we have to go.
We can look to what God is doing for you, for us.
We can participate in what God is doing to set us all free.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.