

# FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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**SERMON:** *Loving God through Ritual and Symbol*

**SERIES:** *Pathways*

**SCRIPTURES:** *Numbers 15:38-40; Joshua 4:2-9; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26*

**SPEAKER:** *Shaun Kipe*

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*\*Credit to Bible Gateway; Gary Thomas, the book “Common Prayer”*

Well good morning and welcome to Five Forks Church. It is good to be back in person with you today. We are in the fourth week of our sermon series on Pathways (**SERMON SERIES GRAPHIC**). Discovering and exploring 9 different Pathways for connecting with God.

So far we have looked at:

**The naturalist pathway – connecting with God in nature.**

**The sensate pathway – connecting with God through our senses.**

**The ascetic pathway – connecting with God through solitude and simplicity.**

Not all of these pathways will resonate with us. And at the same time, there’s an element in each of the pathways that is important for us to grasp and even appreciate in our own lives.

For some, the level of solitude and simplicity will be much greater, but we all need to consider and wrestle with how it applies in our own lives, even if this is not a primary pathway for us.

Today, we want to take a few minutes to talk about the fourth pathway. The pathway for today is...

## **I. The Traditionalist Pathway**

Simply put **the traditionalist pathway is connecting with God through ritual, symbol and sacrifice.** If you are a traditionalist, it means you find value and meaning in format and structure and repetition.

Now pause for just a moment. I know that certain words carry significant emotional responses.

For example, at our house, 8pm is **“bedtime.”** And that is a word that is usually met with groans, and dismay and rebellion. There are studies done on this, certain words give people a negative emotional response. Words like: **PHLEGM, MOIST, HOMEWORK...**even **“Dallas Cowboys”** and **“Philadelphia Eagles”** was on that list.

And so I just want to acknowledge that words like “tradition and ritual and structure” can have that kind of response. Because for some, when they think of tradition and ritual, sense a kind of emptiness. *“Rigid, formal practices and doing something because it’s always been done and not because there is any kind of authentic purpose and meaning behind it.”*

God actually warned his people about the practice of empty rituals...

**Isaiah 29 - <sup>13</sup>“These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught.**

They’re practicing the rituals, but the rituals have lost their meaning.

And yet, at the same time, isn't it interesting that many of the significant moments in our lives are infused with ritual and tradition?

We sing happy birthday and bring a cake with candle's and gifts to celebrate a person's birthday.

A wedding ceremony is filled with traditions about best man and maid of honor, traditional dances, to the format of the ceremony itself and even some of the phrases spoken during the ceremony.

When we seek to celebrate some of our most sacred human experiences we do so through ritual. The traditionalist pathway applies that concept to connecting with God.

Ok so let's begin by looking at where we find examples of the traditionalist pathway in Scripture.

### **A. The traditionalist pathway in Scripture.**

Turn to Genesis 28...

You may be familiar with the story of **Jacob and Esau**, two son's of **Isaac**. Isaac is getting old, he's about to die. There's a ritual blessing in that culture where the father blesses his older son. But Jacob is younger and he connivingly steals this blessing from Esau. It's a whole mess. But after this happens. Isaac, the father, tells Jacob, I don't want you to marry any of the women in here in Canaan, I want you to go back to our homeland and find a wife. And on this journey back, Jacob has this kind of incredible life-changing dream, where he finds himself in God's presence. And I want you to notice how symbol plays a part in this story.

**Genesis 28 - <sup>10</sup> Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. <sup>11</sup> When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of**

**the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. <sup>12</sup> He had a dream in which he saw a stairway...with its top reaching to heaven...<sup>13</sup> There above it<sup>[c]</sup> stood the LORD, and he said: “I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham...I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. <sup>14</sup> Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth...All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.<sup>[d]</sup> <sup>15</sup> I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go...I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”**

Just an incredible promise God makes to Jacob. Possibly the pinnacle moment in Jacob's entire life. Now watch what happens.

**<sup>16</sup> When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it...This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”**

**<sup>18</sup> Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. <sup>19</sup> He called that place Bethel...(literally it means, house of God).**

Jacob uses this stone as a symbol to remind him of this most significant encounter with God.

The Hebrews have a word for this, they call it a **“zichron”**...something that is a memorial set up as reminder of something important. That stone became a symbol reminding Jacob of God's promise and presence.

These zichrons appear all throughout Scripture.

Israelites enter the Promised Land for the first time, cross the Jordan river...what is the first thing they do when they cross the river?

**Joshua 4 - <sup>9</sup> Joshua set up twelve stones that had been<sup>[a]</sup> in the middle of the Jordan at the spot where the priests who carried the ark of the covenant had stood. And they are there to this day.**

God says you need to remember this moment. This Zichron is a symbol of my presence. This is the heart behind the traditionalist pathway. That we meet with God through symbol, ritual.

Ok, so let just talk about

### **B. 3 components of the traditionalist pathway.**

#### **1. Ritual**

**Rituals help us to connect with God by providing structure to our relationship with a God who is infinite.**

Author Gertrud Nelson says that you can think about rituals a little bit like a little **child at the beach (PIC)**. *“We watch how children, frightened by the vast and powerful surf, ‘tame’ it by scooping a small hole in the sand near where the waves break and letting the water fill the hole. In essence, children respond to the vast ocean by creating a ‘mini-ocean’, which they can control and manage.*

*They create this hole in order to catch something transcendent... This gives them a safe space, boundaries within which to experience the magnificence of the ocean. In the same way, rituals provide a way for us to enter into God’s presence.*

Perhaps the clearest example in our Christian tradition is our **communion ritual**.

Think about it. There is something mysterious about communion and what it represents. The creator God, enters human flesh and gives up his body and blood...dying on a cross on behalf of a broken creation in order to bring reconciliation and healing. There is much that is mysterious and even incomprehensible about this. And yet, in the simple act, ritual of breaking bread and drinking juice we are invited to remember and internalize this theological mystery.

Paul says, **1 Corinthians 11 - The Lord Jesus...took bread, <sup>24</sup> and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” <sup>25</sup> In the same way...he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” <sup>26</sup> For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.**

The ritual of communion provides the structure within which we connect to God.

If you’ve gone bowling before...and maybe you’re inexperienced you throw a lot of gutter balls. Not that I’m speaking from personal experience. But as a soccer player, who is more inclined toward foot eye coordination, rather than hand eye coordination bowling is not so easy. But they have a way to help inept players like myself...did you know this, they have **“bumper rails” (PICTURE)** that can be put up to block the ball from going in the gutter. You are guaranteed to not get a gutter ball. Helps to keep the ball on the track. That’s what ritual structure does in our relationship with God.

I was thinking specifically about how “structure” can be helpful regarding our prayer lives. In most of our traditions we practice **“informal prayer.”** Just talk to God and tell him what’s on your heart. And that is good and right and true. There is something personal and vulnerable about these informal prayers. But there are some who maybe struggle to pray...maybe you just struggle to find the words to say, or your mind starts wandering, you think about all kinds of other stuff and can’t stay

focused or maybe you're just new to prayer in general (like that inexperienced bowler) and you need a little bit of help getting started. If that's you I would encourage you to consider some times of more **formal structured prayer**.

The book of Psalms is great for this. I have some Psalms listed for you to try this with in the take-home flyer this week. Use a Psalm as your prayer to God. Allow the Psalmist's words to become yours.

Pray through, The Lord's Prayer.

Or I'll just mention another really great resource when it comes to bringing structure to your time of connecting with God. This is also on the take-home flyer. There is a book I recommend you consider called "**Common Prayer: A liturgy for ordinary radicals**"

This book will take you through the entire year, day by day using liturgy, structure and form to help you connect with God.

If you're a traditionalist...this formatted structure maybe incredibly helpful for you.

Ok, and then a second important aspect of rituals is that...

**Rituals also help us to connect with the larger historical community of faith.**

So much of our modern day Christianity is infused with individualism. It's about me and my personal relationship with Jesus. And while that's an important aspect of our faith. Christianity was always intended to be a team sport, participation in a community. The rituals and traditions of the church are like wearing the gear of your favorite team...they remind us and invite us back into solidarity with that larger community of faith.

Have you ever thought about this? **Only followers of Jesus celebrate communion.** People of other faiths, people who claim they have no faith, don't take communion.

At the heart of communion is the idea that we are a group of people sharing something in common in our belief about what happened 2,000 years ago on that cross and the few days afterward.

**Dietrich Bonhoeffer** says, **Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ...We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.**

You and I, we are different, we share different likes and dislikes, we have different life experiences. Good chance we disagree on food, sports, music, politics, even some of our theology. But the communion ritual says we share something together that transcends our differences.

This is so important for the church today, to understand. There are so many different divisions of Christianity – **Greek/Russian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Reformed, Presbyterian, Baptist, Anabaptist, Methodist, Mennonite**...by one count, there are **more than 38,000 Christian denominations.** Sadly many un-churched people have said that the greatest barrier to becoming a Christian, joining the community of faith, is all the division they see in the church. But the truth is God's deepest longing is for the church to be united. As one old preacher has said, "We (the church world-wide) gotta get it together, because Jesus is coming back, and he's coming back for a bride, not a harem." God has only one church.

The rituals and traditions of the church, perhaps more than anything else, remind us that we part of the larger community of faith.

Ok, the second aspect of the traditionalist pathway is



## 2. Symbol

We talked a little bit about this a few minutes ago...those Hebrew Zichrons...setting up stones as symbols. Symbols, provide meaning to our faith by helping us to remember.

We use symbols all over our world because we know how valuable they are in helping us to recall or remember certain things. **SHOW SYMBOLS ON SCREEN ONE AT A TIME: (Nike, Google, Speed Limit, 49ers symbol)**

**Symbols can help us to overcome one of the great difficulties of the Christian life – namely the problem of a poor memory.** (Thomas) So often, in our daily lives we don't live as Jesus lived because we forget His presence. When you lie. When you lose your temper. When you harbor bitterness. When foster greed. When you lust. It's because in those moments you don't remember or you don't want to remember God's Presence. Symbols can help us remember.

We talked about this concept a little bit last January. But just refresh your mind...

**Numbers 15 - <sup>37</sup> The LORD said to Moses, <sup>38</sup> “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘Throughout the generations to come you are to make tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel. <sup>39</sup> You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the LORD, that you may obey them...**

Anybody know what this is? **(Image of Jewish prayer shawl)**. This is a picture of a Jewish prayer shawl. You'll notice these little tassels on the fringe of the shawl. These tassels are called **“tzitzit”** in Hebrew.

The tassels were a symbol of God's laws...a daily reminder, to live the way God created you to live.

So, we are part of the BIC church. Did you know that the BIC church has a symbol?

When you pull into the parking lot at Five Forks church up on the very front of the brick building...you will see this symbol (**PIC OF CHURCH BIC LOGO**).

These are three of the central symbols of the Brethren in Christ church.

There is **a cross**. This is a common symbol for many who follow Jesus. It represents the climax of the story of Scripture. Jesus giving his life on the cross.

It's interesting, one of the things you'll notice if you look at crosses in various traditions, it is viewed in different ways. Some traditions have Jesus body on the cross (**PIC**). The significance of that symbol, is remembering the suffering of Jesus on our behalf. Most protestant traditions, however, tend to picture an empty cross (**PIC**), symbolizing that death did not win, but that Jesus leaves the cross empty in resurrection life. Either way, the symbolism points us to some of the core values of our faith.

You can get used to seeing the cross in such a way that it no longer impacts you. Or sometimes, I think the cross becomes an overused symbol. I see certain people or groups of people wearing crosses on a necklace or earrings, but they're not living like followers of Jesus. The symbol has lost its meaning. But for those of you who are traditionalist pathwayers...the cross can be a regular reminder of this most significant event.

What about this image?

**A dove.** This is a symbol of God's Holy Spirit. A reminder that you can't live the Jesus life on your own. You need help. I remember when our daughter Adalyn was very young, she was always very independent. She would walk around saying, "No Daddy, I do it myself." The dove reminds us you don't follow Jesus yourself. You need God's help to become the person you were created to be. One of the first steps to Spiritual maturity is admitting you need God's help. God's Holy Spirit as we'll see throughout this year help us to grow in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

And then the third symbol of the BIC logo is this (**WASH BASIN AND TOWEL**)?

Now what is this? That's right, it's a wash basin and towel. Perhaps one of the unique symbols related to the BIC church. We still, once a year, practice a ritual at Five Forks church that you will hear more about in the coming weeks, called "Foot washing", in the week leading up to Easter Sunday. If you've never participated, yep, it's a little weird. But it can be one of the most powerful symbols/rituals of our faith. It comes from the story of the Last Supper where Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. It is a reminder of our posture of humility and service to the community. At that meal the rabbi, washed the feet of his followers, including the feet of his enemy and betrayer. This symbol reminds us of our posture as a people should be one of humility and servanthood, laying down our rights on behalf of others to serve, even our enemies.

Every time you pull into the church now, you'll see this symbol it will be a reminder of who we are trying to be in the world.

Ok, last concept related to the traditionalist pathway...and that is

### 3. Sacrifice

In the Old Testament one of the core aspects of the Hebrews' ritual practices was the elaborate sacrificial system as a mode of connecting with God. And yes, Jesus in the New Testament becomes the final and complete sacrifice, so that we no longer practice many of those sacrificial rituals.

But the concept related to sacrifice is still a significant identifying marker of God's people. Paul says in the book of Romans, you should **“offer your body as a living sacrifice holy and pleasing to God.”**

Jesus in his own teaching says, **“unless you take up your cross and follow me you cannot be my disciple.”**

So much of our Christian faith today has become about what I am getting out of my faith, how does it benefit me and make my life better, make me happier. Sacrifice reminds us, that following Jesus isn't mostly about me, but it's about giving up my life to Him.

Sacrifice can become one of the most significant ways that we connect our lives to God's. And I want to mention one ritual of the Church that can be beneficial in this regard. Don't have time to go into detail on this...but the ritual is called:

## **Lent**

Lent is a 40 day period of usually sacrificing or setting aside something in your life, as way of imitating Jesus who spent 40 days in the desert fasting. Lent begins in February on what is called Ash Wednesday (you've likely seen people with ash on their forehead that day...and it ends on the Thursday before Easter. As you sacrifice something for those 40 days (like your morning Coffee, your favorite TV show)...you are reminded of the ultimate sacrifice Jesus made on your behalf at Easter. Lent can be one of the most significant experiences of connecting with God.

Ok...Ritual, symbol, and sacrifice...three key aspects of the traditionalist pathway.

Ok, let's just mention

### **C. One caution for the Traditionalist**

The caution for the traditionalist is **idolatry**. And I know that as soon as I say that, many of us maybe think "Oh, idol worship, yeah that's not me...that's an ancient practice." I'm using this term in a broader sense though. That we end up worshipping the symbol or ritual itself.

There's a story in the OT, book of Numbers, where God commands Moses to build a bronze serpent and

**"...anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." <sup>9</sup> So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived." (Numbers 21)**

It was intended as a symbol of God's healing power. However, the symbol quickly became an idol. People started to trust that it was the bronze snake that did the healing.

**2 Kings 18 - <sup>3</sup> King Hezekiah did what was right in the eyes of the LORD... <sup>4</sup> He removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it.**

They started to worship the symbol. Traditionalists if they are not careful, can deify the rituals or symbols of our faith.

We don't worship the cross... The cross points us to Jesus. We worship Jesus. The difference is subtle, but oh so important.

We don't worship the Bible...the Bible point us to Jesus. And we worship Jesus.

Communion is a symbol of our faith. But we don't want to get into "deifying" our practice of communion. We have a way of doing our communion ritual at Five Forks. Our form of the communion ritual. We recite a certain "phraseology", we make our bread a certain way.

We even like to talk about the recipe for our Five Forks communion bread and that's ok, as long as our Five Forks communion bread and ritual do not become the focus. That bread is to point us to Jesus.

Thomas says, **"No symbol or ritual has absolute value in itself."**

Ok, so this week the invitation is...

#### **D. An invitation to ritual and symbol**

As a pathway for connecting with God. We have to be intentional in how we go about doing this.

It's possible to practice all of the rituals and never connect with God.

Jesus warned followers in the New Testament that they clean the outside of the dish...they practice the religious rites...but inside they are full of dead person's bones. (Matthew 23:27)

We must be intentional about this. Once again, you'll find on the first page the self-evaluation for the traditionalist pathway. This should be self-evaluation #4 if you've

been following along for the entire series. And now you have 4 to compare and contrast.

And then on the second page you'll see I have some suggested ideas for practicing the traditionalist pathway. We start with Scriptures related to the traditionalist pathway. And then some ideas for "ritual and symbol" that you can incorporate into your week as a mode of connecting with God and then the reflection questions and conversation with God about what you are learning through the traditionalist pathway.

**At 9:45am Service ONLY:**

Ok, so as we close today. I'm not going to pray as usual. But instead, I'm going to invite you to stand and we are going to recite together, as a creed/ritual expression, the first few words of our closing song before we sing them together...words many of you will be familiar with, they come from our tradition of worship but may they not be empty words, but may you think about the significance of these words as read them together. And then we will sing them with the band.

**Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father  
There is no shadow of turning with Thee  
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not  
As Thou hast been, Thou forever will be**

**Great is Thy faithfulness**

Let us sing together...