

Idolatry: Habit
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In our house, Tuesday night is taco night.
I call it taco night,
which is funny,
because the truth is that I have a burrito
and my kids - who are 8 and almost 5 - have quesadillas.
A taco is sort of in-between a burrito and a quesadilla,
and taco alliterates to Tuesday, so there you go.
Having a habit, a routine, keeps things simple.
This week though, very exciting, we had a guest for taco
night,
and I asked in advance, what do you like on your tacos?
Refried beans.

Oh, good, I like refried beans!
That's easy to make.
So when I went shopping I got some;
to go along with all the usual ingredients - ground turkey,
cheese, olives, red peppers, tomatoes, salsa, guacamole -
I picked up a can of refried beans.
And Tuesday, after I got back from a Transform Rockford
meeting and sent the babysitter home, I started dinner
right away.
Burritos for adults, quesadillas for kids.

And you know where the can of refried beans is, don't
you?

On the shelf in my pantry.
Sitting right there, unused.
I didn't think about it until the next day,
and thought, oh, darn! I was going to use that!

And my next thought-
that'll make a perfect sermon illustration!
You know what I'm like.

That's exactly, I thought, what Sunday's message is
about:
the power of habit.
It is not my habit to make beans.
And so I would have had to stop, think, and use my
conscious mind
to remember to change the recipe.
And the chances of that happening
with hungry adult, hungry kids, end of a long day -
zilch. Zero. Nada. Not-gonna-happen.

Habit can be a life saver:
I can make a good balanced meal without really thinking
about it.
Habit gets me to church without thinking about the route,
it guides my feet while I run
and types my passwords.
Habits are more than these basic life routines -
I have habits of daily time for prayer and reflection each
morning as my tea cools,

I have habits to talk to friends,
to read stories to my kids before bed,
to begin almost every conversation with the important
part: "how are you?",
and yes, a habit to come to worship.
Long before I was a minister, I had that habit -
it is Sunday, let's go to church.
Habits can be life savers,
time savers,
energy savers.

But when we get stuck in habit,
go along without thinking about it,
this can cause problems.
More serious problems than forgetting to make the
refried beans.
Problems of personal living.
Problems with the structure of society.
Problems with the health of our spirit.

This month, we are wondering together what it means to
be a people of tradition.
Sometimes we think we are the religion without tradition
-
we are the bold explorers, not like those other hide-
bound faiths.
But that's completely bogus.
We have traditions, too, but we are just unaware of them
-

they are habits, unconscious traditions.
So today's invitation is to make our habits conscious,
think about them,
reconsider whether they serve us well,
and then, with intention and purpose, form new and
better habits when we can.
To move from unaware to self-aware to purpose.
To avoid the temptation, the idolatry, of doing things
because we've always done them,
and instead be faithful risk-takers,
to be the kind of people who throw away the
breadcrumbs,
who are willing to find the house and not be afraid.
Try them, green eggs and ham.
You may discover, despite all your assumptions of habit,
that they are delicious.
Don't be afraid of some change.

So let me give you some examples
of what it might mean to question your habits and create
new and better ones.

A friend of mine once told me that "Ain't nobody can
push your buttons like them that sewed 'em on."
And boy, ain't that true.
Someone in a family relationship -
a child, a parent, a spouse, a sibling -
is in a pattern they don't like.

But they feel trapped, keep having their buttons pushed,
keep reacting the same way.

In one family, everybody had the habit of gossip.

If the sister was dating a loser,
and in mom's opinion, she always was,
well, everyone else heard all about it.

The brother, the dad, the aunt, the grandfather.

The neighbor, the co-worker.

Everyone except the sister, of course,
you didn't talk directly to the person -
only behind their back.

And when the mom started drinking too much too often,
the whole family talked about it, but not with her.

When the aunt got a new job,
they all talked about it at length.

Not with her, but everyone shared their own opinions.

The grandfather's health scare was discussed endlessly,
unless he was there - that wouldn't be polite.

So he was in the dark about what they thought he should
do.

Until one day, the brother brought his new boyfriend
home.

They had gossiped about him being gay a long time ago
and were pretty much over it -
that was old news.

They liked the boyfriend,

but then the family started to talk smack about the neighbor,
and how they dressed or did their lawn or some other trivial thing,
and the boyfriend,
he cleared his throat and said,
gee, in my family, we don't talk about people when they aren't there.

Silence.

Hasty change of subject.

That is a brave boyfriend.

Whenever the boyfriend was around, they followed that rule.

They knew the gossip was no good, and the criticism of each other was worse,

and the secrets were worse than that.

But it was just their habit.

They didn't even know they could break it.

Eventually, they stopped doing it in front of the brother, too,

even when the boyfriend wasn't there -

nothing needed to be said,

but they just figured he probably agreed with the boyfriend.

Then something remarkable happened:
neither the brother or his boyfriend there,
the mom and dad, sitting on the porch, started to gossip
about the grandfather's health again,
and the sister spoke up:
I think we should talk to him about it directly. Don't you?

Well, how about that.

Family systems are patterns - we all do them.
Criticism, manners, addiction, gossip, helpfulness, co-
dependence, kindness,
all these things, good and bad, are habits.
And we can become conscious of them - and change
them.

It usually happens through the addition of someone
outside the system -
or through family therapy and changes in behavior, over
time -
that break down old habits and make new ones.
But it can change;
and that gives all of us a lot of hope.

I've seen families change their patterns -
and even if the whole family doesn't, when one person
stops taking the bait,
when one person throws away the breadcrumbs,
they can step out of the cycle, and live a healthier life;
stop having their buttons pushed.

If you feel trapped by your family habits,
I want you to know you can change how you participate
in them and respond to them.

You can!

First, become aware of them, name them, to yourself and
others,

over and over again; say that's the pattern,
and then start changing how you personally respond.

Be intentional, be aware, until your new way of being is
so ingrained

that you don't have to struggle to be the person YOU
want to be.

It isn't easy, but folks do it all the time, and you can, too.

It isn't just individuals and families that have habits, of
course.

Cities and nations can have them, and often do.

When we do things without thinking about them,

when we don't question our assumptions -

or, I should say, when the majority

doesn't listen to the powerful questions

of those excluded from their assumptions -

these are social habits.

These social habits range from everything to how close
we stand to each other,

how and what we eat,

the way we read and talk and make money,

the places we live, shop, play and more.

I've been thinking this week, of course, about Baltimore. So many trying to love their city, to care for it: peaceful protestors, speaking up against the centuries-long oppression, disenfranchisement, and violence, committed by whites in power against African-Americans. In that city in particular.

The few who resort to violence, their frustration too great to be appeased by calls for patience.

Nobody seems to notice when they protest peacefully. But an uprising makes the news.

A big part of those habits of oppression that folks are protesting -

as in most American cities - is abusive police tactics.

In Baltimore, it is what's called the rough ride -

to put a suspect, handcuffed, in a steel box, the back of a van,

no seatbelt,

and drive around for an hour, hitting every pothole, breaking hard, taking corners fast.

That's what severed Freddie Grey's spine. And killed him.

The city of Baltimore has paid out \$6 million to settle cases of police violence

in the last four years alone;

Freddie Grey is only one of many deaths of suspects in custody.

We're not talking about he pulled a gun, or I thought he was about to. No.

We're talking about he was already in handcuffs, in custody, and yet still was beaten to death.

And I know a lot of those protesting this violence, in Baltimore, in Ferguson, in Chicago, all over the country, feel that this is just the way cops are. I've heard that from folks, all the time. This is the way they are. But I tell them, no, it isn't. No it isn't.

It's the culture of some departments. Some cities. But it doesn't have to be, and it can change. Look at Rockford. Yes, Rockford, as a positive example. Don't freak out.

It ain't perfect, but talk to any leader in the black community in this town, and I talk to a lot of them all the time, and they'll tell you without hesitation that the department has changed in the last few years. New habits - new procedures, new training, new expectations.

And over time, new habits become just the way we do things.

Not everyone will agree with every change,
and some folks will always feel treated badly.

Politics, struggle for power, personality conflicts all threaten to get in the way.

It is a work in progress.

Nobody's perfect here.

But I want to sing the praises of the Rockford Police Department for being willing engage this work seriously.

The cops in this town don't do rough rides, they don't beat suspects in custody,

and even though it is a hard, stressful job, harder than a lot of us can imagine,

almost all of them treat people with dignity and respect.

Habits matter.

And they can change.

They changed in Rockford because of an intervention - like the boyfriend in the family - we called in an outsider,

the Department of Justice,

and then actually listened to most of their recommendations.

I could spend the whole sermon on this topic, of course, but what I want to say is that it is my hope and my prayer

prayer

that other cities across the county will get an intervention,

will make new habits and stick to them.

Then, when this most pressing issue simmers down a little, to not forget the wider work.

Build on new habits in criminal justice to create other new habits:

about neighborhood redevelopment, and jobs creation, and health care access, and education quality - and all those other things that keep this, unfortunately, a racist country.

The conditions which make neighborhoods war zones and the police the occupiers, instead of all of us, white, black, brown and blue, all citizens together.

Racism is a social habit we can break, but only with concerted effort.

And there is no excuse for delay.

I want to give one more example of a habit you can break, become conscious of, and then reform, so that you can be more the kind of person you want to be.

And I'll keep it brief, because it's pretty obvious.

Your spiritual habits.

You're coming to church for worship.

Some of you have the habit of coming pretty much every week.

Unless you are sick or traveling, you are here.

Others of you do not have this habit.

Here's what I know about spiritual habits.
You need to create them, and stop thinking about them.
When I have to think, each morning, oh, I should do my
prayer time,
well, sometimes I forget.
When my body remembers that, you breathe in the tea,
and you pray.
When it is habit, I don't forget.
And when life is hard, when I'm confused, I don't have
the energy to remember.
But if habit remembers, then I have that safety, that rock
to cling to.

It's a more serious version of the refried beans:
I was too busy to add something.
But I did all the usual ingredients with no problem.
Make your spiritual practice a usual ingredient.

If you have to think about coming to church or not on a
particular Sunday,
that takes cognitive effort.
And when your life is hard, you might not have the
energy to do it -
and miss the time, the community, the inspiration and
comfort you need most.
I hear from folks - I'm sorry I'm missing church, my life is
just too hectic.
You are who needs this hour of stillness and purpose
more than anyone - don't stop coming!

You have to make it a habit -

Sunday, you come to church.

Not a conscious thought,

just what you do.

A habit that might save you, and remind you who you are
and wish to be.

So today I say, throw away your breadcrumbs.

Dare to question.

Search for the truth, and even if you don't find answers,
dare to question.

As a person, a member of society, a spiritual pilgrim,
throw away your old habits, become conscious of them,
consider what serves

the cause of love, and justice, and wholeness.

Try some new things. Green eggs. Refried beans.

Try some new things. New family patterns. New ways of
being a community.

Coming to church every week.

Keep at it until it becomes your new habit,

until you have built your new way,

getting stronger every day,

until your habits reflect not who you were, but who you
wish to become.

Throw away your breadcrumbs; the forest of possibility
awaits.

Let's sing.