

Renewing the ties that bind

Religion: from the Latin, *religo*, to tie or bind together. Sometimes it seems that the various aspects of our bound-together life, our *religious* life, aren't very bound together at all. Liturgy stands apart from life, a "safe-haven" from "real" concerns. Major issues of the day seem relatively untouched and untouchable by our faith life.

As we begin a New Year, and rush headlong through three liturgical seasons in less than 6 weeks, it's time to renew those ties that bind. The liturgical calendar helps us to do that.

We begin the year in the high season of incarnation. Beyond the consumer madness that peaked a few weeks ago, what is there? Is shopping and buying the essential link between our religious world and our everyday life? Hardly. If we think of Christmas in terms of incarnation, we encounter the importance of the body, human history, and creation.

The body is big in Christianity. The incarnation is all about God, the bodyless, transcendent Creator revealing the divine self in nothing less than a body like ours. The body is a place of revelation, not just in its uniqueness, but in being part of the shared human reality. Most of us know pain, hunger, joy as bodily experiences. But do we allow this experience to connect us to others who experience the same thing?

Bodies have beginnings and endings—the womb to the tomb. For each of us,

this lifespan is our personal history in which we encounter God and others in different bonds of love, indifference, friendship, hatred. There's that word again: bonds, ties. In fact, we say that because God took human flesh, we are bound to all other people. Our histories are bound together. Do we recognize this intimate connection? When one human being is diminished by torture, do we feel our own diminishment?

In the incarnation, the Creator becomes part of creation, the ultimate Word spoken through creation, which the Church has always taught is one of the ways that God communicates the divine self. *When we walk through the church doors, what happens to our bonds?* Do we recognize that we are bound to all those other parts of creation: to the water, the birds and fish, the plants, the living creatures, the earth itself? When we hear that yet another species is endangered or has disappeared, do we hear the silence of God's voice that has been stilled in that creature? Do we feel a loss as another creature disappears? Through God, we are bound to creation, God's first word to humanity.

And then, in a flash, it's February 3, and we're burning palms for the ashes that will mark our faces on Ash Wednesday. Funny, isn't it, how so many people who otherwise have little contact with the liturgical calendar know when



Ash Wednesday is! In this simple sign, the ashes of burnt palm rubbed cruciform into our foreheads, we recognize yet another bond: our own sinfulness and our own mortality. The smudge that binds us together can make us conscious of how little we really understand the bonds that hold us captive. The words of Isaiah for the fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time, one of the Sundays swallowed up by this year's early Lent, creep back into our consciousness: "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" (Isaiah 58.7-8). There are those bonds again: except this time we are called to loosen them, to bind things together in a new way. The injustice that marks our world continues because we fail to recognize how we are bound together, and that we must refashion these ties that bind us so that indeed the kingdom of God's justice and peace can prevail. This is profoundly religious work. Hard, challenging work, yes. Work that requires personal change and communal change. We embark on this journey of finding new ways to bind ourselves to one another because we know that it is possible. God's Spirit moves in our hearts and in those of all people of good will.

Jesus has made clear to whom he is bound: "Whatsoever you do to these, the least of my brothers and sisters, you do to me." Can we align our bonds so they are consistent with his?

We say that our liturgical activity is the highest form of our religious activity: the liturgy is the source and summit of our lives of faith. So, when we walk through the church doors, what happens to our bonds?

Our bonds to one another: We pray as the body of Christ. Do we recognize that we are joined to each other? Do we realize the consequences of this bonding?

We become more deeply the body of Christ. In other words, our bonds to Christ and to each other are deepened as we share in the Lord's body and blood? Do we pray and act out of this bond, or do we resist it?

We listen to God's word. How can we hear God's word here if we are deaf to it in creation? Do we care when good farm land is turned into condo developments? When industry (the industry that pays our salaries) pollutes the waterways? What if we were to think of it as industry polluting God's word? That might get someone's attention in church!

We bring gifts of bread and wine, fruit of the earth and work of human hands. We ingest these good gifts, but do we recognize their vulnerability in the face of climate change? The vulnerability of those who produce them? How by offering them and eating and drinking them, they bind us to the whole of creation? Not only to the whole of creation, but to all those whose bodies ache for the nourishment of daily bread and whose souls starve for meaning? James reminds us: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

So, during this new year and new Lent that are upon us, let's become conscious of those ties that bind us: to God, to other human beings, to all creation. Let's make sure that our liturgical concerns serve religion that is pure and undefiled before God. Let's make sure that our liturgical actions forge authentic bonds; that they become true religious—binding—acts.

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