

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God of all ages, we humbly come to this place to be your people, to sing your songs, to lift up your name, your work, your mission as the most important things in a world that often marks the smallest things as of highest importance. We fall short, we fail to learn, we have to live through the same lessons over and over, but in the midst of it, you are there to provide your graceful love. We know we are beloved when the world tells us otherwise, that we do not fit the so-called right molds or features. Because of you, we know these things are false and not worth dwelling upon. No matter how we differ from our neighbors, we are precious.

We praise you and seek you, for you have been with us for ages past. We follow you and look to you for our lives, because, indeed, your steadfast love endures forever. While we as limited creatures seek to grasp that fully, we live in cycles of repetition and renewal. We need cycles of life to become our full selves. We need the stories, the lessons, the instruction more than once, as we need newness in the midst of the familiar. We must hear of your goodness, love, and mission time and time again until we can grasp it for ourselves in our own ways. Thank you for the grace to live this process and discernment out as we will and for the support to help make the life real and authentic to us. We pray all these things in the name of our graceful teacher who loves us and names us as his just as we are, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray...

SERMON

Let me tell you a riddle, and you tell me the answer. Pete and Repeat are in a boat. Pete fell out; who is left? Pete and Repeat are in a boat. Pete fell out; who is left? This could go on and on and on and on if we let it. It's repetition and more repetition until you

get sick. Sometimes repetition is bad. This riddle is one case. You sometimes want to avoid it. I only had to get into one minor car accident when I was 16 to know that I never wanted to do it again. Sometimes things can get said over and over that we find hurtful. Other times, repetition is positive. It is comforting to establish a routine. We can hear things that uplift, reinforce, and love over and over. Repetition can allow us to reflect, hear, and understand anew what may have been too familiar and possibly boring. Sometimes we just like repetition for its familiarity and comfort. Overdone, repetition for repetition's sake does nothing but bore us and make us stare at our watches; repetition for the sake of hearing the message with new ears for a new time is what makes our faith real. Newness and repetition work alongside for the betterment of each other. Let's take a look at the repetition of our reading and in our lives.

At the base, the psalms are worship songs. The book of Psalms is essentially the Bible's hymnal, and a diverse one it is. It's no stretch to say that it is the most beloved book of songs in all of history, perhaps the most beloved book of the Bible itself. These 150 examples are all songs that were crafted to apply to many situations in the life of people of faith. Some are praise songs. Some songs tell a story, like this psalm, which tells of God's greatness and God's mighty acts throughout history. Some are longer, like Psalm 119, which seems to be like the song "American Pie" of its age. Some cry out to God, asking, "Why, God, is this happening?" Some lament and bemoan the current situation. Some tell of the King and the inauguration of the King, some tell of God's faithfulness. Each one is crafted to a certain situation with a certain context, but we do not have any of the original music or arrangement. Some are attributed to David; others have no stated author. Some date from the time of David, and some speak of events that are much later than David.

In this book of diverse songs, Psalm 136 is a unique psalm that happens to be one of my favorites. Not only does it tell the story of God's works and God's faithfulness throughout the history of Israel, it also says the same thing, over and over as its refrain, "God's steadfast love endures forever." And by over and over, I mean over and over. It almost becomes redundant. "Yes, I get it, God's steadfast love endures forever." So what? The repetitive nature of Psalm 136 is unique, but after a while, the refrain can seem somewhat redundant. In Bible Study, we read through it once, and everyone found it to be unique and refreshing. The second time around, some started thinking that the repetition wasn't as much fun anymore. After a while, you get to thinking why we want a song where the lines are repeated continuously, especially when you hear it through several times. One line gives a statement about God's mightiness, God's saving actions, God's loving nature, and then you go back to the refrain, "God's steadfast love endures forever." The repetition can be monotonous, but it is there for a reason. It is natural to lose interest if we hear the refrain too much, but the refrain and its ongoing repetition is an opportunity. If we hear the repetition without the first line, then yes, it will get boring. The repetition has meaning and significance, for it reminds us of who our God is, and who we are as a result. If we hear them in tandem, repetition with unfamiliarity, then we have completeness.

While the message of the psalm tells us of God's faithfulness as everlasting, it speaks more volumes than that. The psalm also, between the lines, speaks of repetition's importance in our lives. We need repetition, but we need to encounter repetition not as the same thing over and over. We need repetition in hearing familiar things in new ways and to reteach us things we may have forgotten. We do not necessarily learn things after one telling or one experience. In a not so subtle way, the psalm writer expresses to us that

“God’s steadfast love endures forever” in statement and restatement. One line tells us of the story, the other line gives us the reminding interpretation. Of course, the focus of the psalm is on the greatest acts of God for God’s people: the creation of the world, the Exodus from Egypt, and, perhaps rather subtly, the return of the exiles from Babylon many hundreds of years after the first two events. The song reminds the people of God’s goodness and God’s everlasting faithfulness throughout all circumstances of Israel’s history. The people of God forget so easily; this psalm, through repetition, reminds us that God’s love and faithfulness do not fail even when our memories do!

Just as in the psalm, repetition is key to life. It is as simple as things we know in everyday life. We establish a routine to find some grounding in the midst of change. We establish when we do our daily activities and stick to it. This can become toxic when the lack of change gets in the way of growth, and that’s when repetition is called to mix with discernment. The little known and often forgotten last line of the Beatitudes not found in the Bible is “blessed are the flexible, for they will not be bent out of shape.” Repetition becomes too much when the repetition is done for repetition’s sake. We do not live in the familiar solely, as repetition is mixed in with surprise occasionally, sometimes good and sometimes bad. Sometimes you need to hear that the garbage needs to be taken out several times for it to sink in. Sometimes you need to hear again in a new way the story of Jesus life and death, perhaps a particular passage of the gospel, for it to strike a new chord with you. In repetition, we may find surprise, and in surprise, we may find repetition. We have what life is with both of these, surprise with familiarity, and both give each other meaning and purpose.

But these are not just about the same thing in the same way. Repetition is not just about the same thing time and time again but the same thing inspiring something new within us. Even though repetition may be similar and familiar, we are never the same creature from one point in time to another. You were not the same person this Christmas as you were in Christmas 2011. You aren't even the same person who did or did not come to church last week. You have met new people, you bring new memories, you have done new things and thought new thoughts. Familiar things striking at new times spark new ideas and new actions.

I remember when I was younger, I loved to watch reruns of M*A*S*H since I was not around to see the first running. It's still one of my favorite shows. But when you're working with reruns, you're seeing the same thing again and again. Sometimes you hear the same old joke and it rings as familiar, unfunny. Other times, you hear the joke perhaps with a new understanding or it links to a recent happening, and it's not the old joke. It has a new feeling of humor. I felt that way when I was going through theology school and heard Hawkeye and Trapper John joke with Frank Burns about his hypocritical Christianity. He was reading his bible on his bunk when the two jokesters walk in, and Hawkeye says, "Hey Frank, I looked at the end. The devil did it!" I heard something new in the midst of the familiar because I was not the same as I was the last time, and something new sparked in me. Repetition and surprise exist together because we experience both in our lives, and that makes us and shapes us into better creatures if we open our hearts and minds to what we hear in the midst of them.

The psalm is a lesson to us that life and the church are based on repetition to find faithfulness. Services have a basic structure that we do weekly to remind us of certain

things and to help us grow. The church calendar is nothing but repetition. We start yearly with Advent, and we celebrate the same holidays yearly, but we are not called to make each church holiday in the way it was in years past. Each year, each service, each day, each song, each ritual is an invitation to learn and take on something new, something different that forms us into deeper and more complete creatures for God's glory. When we let the repetitions of life not pass us by but to let them fill us, is freshness toward things. God is in the familiar, as the psalm writer makes clear, but God is also in the newness. We are called to integrate both into our lives.

Repetition is important to our lives. We need it to remind ourselves of the goodness of so many things that can get lost in the shuffle of busy-ness. We need it to remind us that we are holy creatures and our God is a loving, wonderful God when we lose sight of God. We need it to see familiar things in renewed ways. We could use repetition to try to figure out who is left when Pete and Repeat are in a boat, but Christianity calls for a different kind of repetition. As we respect the season of Christmas in its new memories and our new situations, I invite you to reflect on what that repetition meant to you and what newness came out of that experience. As we are heading into the season of Lent, a somber time that inches toward the darkness of Good Friday, I invite you not to think of this season as another slow trudge toward the happiness of Easter but to understand what the somberness can teach us all anew about a relationship with God. What stands in the way of making your relationship with God truly life-giving and filling? It's not about giving something up, time and time again, it's about re-evaluating what stands between me and God and what can I move out of the way to step closer to my creator? In the nearer future, we come to the communion table to celebrate the Lord's sacrifice not just among ourselves

but among all members of the church. How will repeating this sacrament help you understand what it means to be a member of Christ's Body in our world today? Let the repetition, repetition, repetition commence for God's glory, so that we may find the surprises in life in the familiar. Amen and amen.