

The challenge of two calendars

The month of May poses certain risks to many preachers. May is a subtle month in the liturgical calendar. With Advent and Lent behind you, it seems as though the big celebrations of the Church are complete. Yet, most months of May not only hold Ascension Day but Pentecost *and* Trinity Sunday. In the calendar that seeks to tell the story of the drama of redemption, these three festivals in the life of the Church are large, grand and significant. Getting these “in”, and doing them justice before school is out and summer vacations begin often makes May a glorious, but demanding month.

But the liturgical and theological demands of May are not what often makes the month risky - at least not by themselves. May holds hazards for preachers not just because of the theological freight of Ascension, Pentecost, and Trinity Sunday. May challenges the well-being of the preacher in part because of the emotional freight of the *other* calendar days in the life of church people. May is a month that also holds Mother’s Day, Memorial Day, and sometimes, graduation recognition. These celebrations hold a different kind of importance for members of the congregation. Both calendars have legitimacy, but one wonders if it is possible to somehow incorporate the two calendars.

Calendar as “Testimony” and “Witness”

Preachers use the Church year calendar as a means of telling the Church’s faith. The recognition of holy days in the Church’s calendar not only ensures that the important chapters in the Church’s story are being told, but accentuate particular aspects of the Church’s testimony that recognize the mighty acts of God. For some of us, observing the holy days of the Church’s calendar is not just holding onto an established curriculum, but it is a way for the Church *to profess its faith through a living testimony*.

Just as every disciple has “high points” in their personal story wherein we say, “and then God showed up and did this in my life”, so the Church has much to say in its story telling about God’s interventions.

The challenge for the preacher and liturgy planner is - of course - that this understanding of the Church’s testimony and calendar is not on the horizon of all of those who gather to worship. The truth is, if the telling of the Church’s story in its testimony ignores the living reality of the *concerns and feelings* that accompany the other celebrations that are part of the congregation’s experience, then preachers may have good seed, but have not adequately prepared the soil for its reception.

This is tricky. As one who is utterly devoted to the church’s calendar, I bristle at the thought of a need to recognize Mother’s Day and Memorial Day. While I am supportive of both, and, supportive of having civic recognition for each, I struggle with how to incorporate the themes of these holidays in the light of the story the church year is telling. Experience teaches preachers however, that designing worship in a way that either *ignores* or *makes focal* these civic holidays, is not helpful.

Two specific challenges of May's civic holidays

One of the challenges of observing civic holidays in worship is that by definition they are *exclusive*. Because these holidays seek to magnify the role of Mothers, the accomplishment of graduates, or the service of veterans, some members of the community do not find points of connection to the events and stories that are being lifted up. Preachers and liturgists know that worship needs to be hospitable for all.

The second challenge with recognition of May's civic holidays lies in the vast diversity of experiences and feelings that are often connected. Mother's Day, for example, is a day where parishioners bring a host of feelings, including feelings that accompany: women whose arms are empty because of infertility, singleness, or bereavement. For every person who wants to lift high and celebrate God's gift of mothers, there are also those present in the congregation who have strong feelings remembering mothers who have been absent, abusive, or have died. Others, who have no objection to mothers or veterans will ask their pastors, "wait a minute, isn't today supposed to be about God and Community not just *one part* of God and Community?"

Memorial Day is another day that brings with it a set of complex feelings. There are those in the congregation who have either served valiantly, or, have comrades in their hearts and minds who "paid the ultimate price." There are also still others whose military and war sensitivity might be exceedingly high. And with Memorial Day comes another set of questions related to recognizing living and dead veterans: hymn choices, appropriate colors, and the presence or absence of flags. It is no wonder why clergy and worship planners often stick to the themes of Ascension, Pentecost, and Trinity Sunday!

Another option: Baptism as the starting point and "frame" for the other holidays

Perhaps the key practical issue for the preacher and liturgist is this: when preparing for May, what is the starting point? If the theme for the day is rooted in the liturgical calendar alone, those expecting Mothers and Memorial themes might be disappointed. If the civic holiday is the starting point, how does one come back to the essential story being told by the Church?

Suppose however, the preacher wanted to affirm the need for the Church's liturgy *and* the world that many of the parishioners bring of Mother's Day, graduations, and Memorial Day. What might that look like? What if what was celebrated in the month of May were a full spectrum of the meanings of baptism as they intersected with the two calendars. Suppose for example, the preacher devoted a four part series - over four weeks - on the baptismal themes that accentuated our participation in Christ.

Each could carry appropriate theological, thematic, and liturgical "freight", while providing ample room and flexibility to incorporate themes that are "lively" in the calendar and life of the congregation. Because baptismal themes are *theological* - as opposed to liturgical or social - they may be more adaptable to the circumstances and the culture of the local congregation. Another advantage of the four part baptismal series is that the themes are not dependent on a particular order, but can be adjusted according to the need of the local congregation.

Baptism as:

Bath - A washing that is done for us to cleanse us, and, to purify us for a life of service.

Branding - Though birthed & named by parents, God puts God's name on us & claims us as his own.

Belonging - In Christ, we are adopted and made to belong in God, and, God's family the Church.

Burial - We participate in the death & resurrection of Christ. For us, there is a dying of One that brings life to many.

A "frame" that accentuates Christ and Christian Community

This kind of trajectory might leave ample room for recognition of Church days - or at least their themes - and, depending on the thematic emphasis, may provide a frame for recognition of some of the themes congregation members may value deeply. While Ascension, Pentecost, and Trinity Sundays are not necessarily directly connected with baptismal themes, they are not far off.

At the heart of the preacher and liturgist's concerns with the recognition of civic holidays in worship is that they tend to be somewhat exclusive. Some members come to *those* holidays with less than positive experiences and feelings.

It seems to me that in some ways, baptism is a great leveler of all "playing fields". Even if the recognition of Mother's or Memorial day are not in some parishioners' script, the story that lies at the heart of baptism - namely *our* identity in Christ - is part of our story. Even for traditions that recognize "believer's baptism" only, the four key themes of baptism have strong links in the core purposes of Christ's mission.

Liturgy, songs, and sermons that revolve around the core themes of baptism are less exclusive - for the already or not yet baptized. If recognition of Mother's or Memorial days is the starting point, there is a higher potential for hurt or misunderstanding. Mothers, fathers, graduates, and veterans each can find themselves at different places on the life-span spectrum and each can find a place in the story that baptism tells.

The Larger Story

Preachers and liturgists can recognize important life-chapters in the lives of some of the congregation, but can do so *within the frame of a story that all of us share*. This story is not ultimately about human birth, parentage, or human freedoms fought and died for, but this story is ultimately about what God has done and is doing in the life of the Church.

What would happen - for example - if the Church led the way in a counter-cultural celebration of the second Sunday of May by celebrating the role of *the community in nurturing and parenting children*? What if *that* Sunday in the Church's worship was a day of holding up the parenting role of mothers and fathers, grandparents and mentors who work together to tell the "next generation" of the Great Rescue we celebrate in

baptism? On that Sunday, the congregation could hold up our “belonging” in Christ, or, our “branding” with Christ’s Name.

Celebrating the story *as starting point* that baptism tells places *God and Christian Community* as the center from which our “smaller stories” are held and told. By telling the story of our faith through the lens of what God does in baptism, namely our status in belonging in Christ, it gives even greater dignity, respect, and importance for the other stories that are both significant and smaller than the Story the Church is telling. In sum, Baptismal themes are a “currency” that is versatile enough to be easily converted into liturgical or civic themes without *denying* or *limiting* the other.

By way of illustration, I recommend four hymn texts by Fred Kaan (see below; some of these texts are available at www.hymnprint.net). Kaan models for us a way of recognizing particular moments in the life of the congregation that frames them within the larger story the Church is telling. Each text is sensitive to the particular event or holiday, but is also mindful of how all the members of the community can “tie in” to that which is being celebrated. Each is an illustration of how a baptized community might celebrate their particular and communal belonging in Christ.

Recommended Hymn Texts by Fred Kaan

For a “Parenting/Nurturing Sunday” or Mother’s Day:

“God of Eve and God of Mary”

For a “Parenting/Nurturing Sunday” or Father’s Day:

“God of Adam, God of Joseph”

For a “Graduation Sunday” Celebration:

“For all who have enriched our lives”

For the Sunday of Memorial Day:

“As with silent hearts we bring to mind”

Marc Nelesen, August 13, 2007
