

My former boss is a crazy baseball fan, like me. One day he came into my office crestfallen. “I can’t buy *The Baseball Register* anymore.”

“What is *The Baseball Register*?” I asked. (I was still a young born-again fan and had not heard of this sacred text.)

“I use it during the games, to see the statistics of each ball player from last year as well as their life-time statistics. I can keep up with me while I watch the game.”

“Dude,” I replied. “What’s the problem, it’s all online. Just use your computer when you watch the game. Problem solved.”

“It’s not the same,” he said, pouting.

At that point I just couldn’t hold back any longer. “Awww, poor baby, they changed your prayer book. Poor Stephen wants his prayer book back.”

He gave me that smirk that told me that I’d gotten to the root of the issue. He also referred to me as an intelligent member of the equine family. “Yeah,” he said. “I don’t want to change; I liked it the old way.”

What was more important – the format or the content?

The Pharisees were having their own “Baseball Register” moment in today’s gospel. “Why aren’t you making your disciples uphold the tradition?” they asked Jesus. “We’ve always done it that way.”

Jesus wanted them to understand that the content – what was in their hearts – was much more important than the form or the tradition. Washing the outside of things really isn’t the point. The washing needed to symbolize the purifying of their hearts, thereby purifying their way of life.

Their hearts were full of much more poison than anything the Pharisees could wash away from the outside. Jesus knew that. Jesus still knows that. I know that. Tradition can be used as a tool to help us worship God or it can become a god in itself.

You’ll notice that we are adding prayers from a New Zealand Prayer Book this morning. They speak to Christian Unity. The world needs us to be less argumentative and more focused on loving our neighbors.

It will take awhile to get used to it. It's okay. Consider the gift of listening to the words and not just saying them by rote. Get to know the content beneath the format.

There are other contexts in which content often gets short shrift when it comes to format. Like Thanksgiving, for instance.

American tradition says that this holiday, established in the 1800s, should be celebrated at home, with family, complete with a menu centered around a big bird. During my formative years, the female members of the family did the preparation, the cooking, the serving, and the cleaning up. The male members of the family retired to the living room to fall asleep watching the Detroit Lions lose to whichever team they were playing that year. There really wasn't much "giving thanks" except to the cooks.

Many sacred cows – traditions that we believe should never change – abound in this and many holidays. These beliefs are what cause the anxiety that always seems to accompany the end of each calendar year. They are drilled into your

head as a little kid and you can't conceive of any other way of doing things. Until, of course, you do.

Then came the year I decided to go to my boyfriend's house for thanksgiving dinner. That decision put a few lumps in the gravy. I had begun to redefine who was family to me. You see, I married that boyfriend.

In the years after that, Thanksgiving holidays came and went. Sometimes we were together, sometimes we were apart. We traded off locations. On one occasion, the men at the table all had lost their fathers that year. It was sobering.

After a few years, we learned to celebrate on a different day, even use a different menu. For me, it helped me remember that the important part was the "giving thanks" part. The people at the table were my family whether we were blood relations or not. Some of my favorite Thanksgiving dinners were potluck suppers at my church where people who didn't have family, or just didn't want to cook, could share fellowship and a meal on a day that focused too much on nuclear families and forgot widows and orphans.

I'm glad we stopped worshipping the meal and began to appreciate each other and our ability to be together on this earth for the short time we're allowed to do so.

Today there are empty chairs and empty tables in my family and, to be honest, in these pews. Despite this fact, we shall be thankful for so very much.

There is sacred cow that roams about Episcopal Churches and has done so for centuries. That sacred cow is Individualism/Congregationalism. It is the belief that your parish should be able to provide everything that everyone needs. The very thought of attending another parish to access something to help you with your spiritual life was like eating with unclean hands. Your loyalties were to lie within your parish – never shall you darken the doors of another.

Yep. That's what I grew up believing. And then, I dated a young man who didn't share my faith tradition. His church had a youth group. Mine barely had youth. So, I ended up going to youth group there. My priest wasn't pleased, but I ignored him. (I guess I've always been a bit of a rebel. Who knew?)

In my Columbus days, I flitted about Episcopal Churches because my home parish didn't have everything I needed for my spiritual journey. A downtown parish provided the opportunity to feed and talk with poor and homeless people. An eastside parish offered the most beautiful music and liturgies. My home parish had educational opportunities galore. My prayer life thrived under the rector of a parish I would call home when I went to seminary.

In my Episcopal travels, I got to know a lot of people I learned how to love them, even when they lived lives very different from my own. I discovered new ways to experience liturgies and found ways to enjoy everything from high and hazy to happy clappy. The traditions of each parish weren't the most important thing. The people I met and the experiences we had together sharing ministries and meals helped me grow in my faith and in my relationship with Jesus.

Over the past year, the vestries of Redeemer and St. Dunstan's have gotten together to get to know each other. Each parish has gifts to give and lessons to teach each other. I've enjoyed collaborating with my colleague Jeff MacKnight

with our youth program. There are social justice issues we are tackling together. We've gone to each other's fund raisers.

Currently, we are looking at the program year calendar to see how we might do more things together. Specifically, we planning to a preacher swap, a joint Christmas pageant, and a joint Shrove Tuesday pancake supper. St. Dunstan's is providing rehearsal space for the Glen Echo Singers, under Geoffrey's direction.

Nearly 10 years ago, then Bishop Chane sent a letter to the clergy explaining that cooperation is the new model for church growth. Keeping our lights under separate bushels doesn't spread the good news of Jesus. Showing love for one another and modeling cooperation does. I'm excited that our two parishes have working toward this cooperation. We do not lose our particularities in doing so – far from it! We are modeling for the diocese and the church what we can be accomplished when we work together. Our individual traditions need to point to the real heart of why we are here: to love God and change the world.

Amen.