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I did some important research this week on a very important topic: food and the Super Bowl

* The Super Bowl is the second most important food holiday, second only to Thanksgiving Day
* The National Chicken Council estimates that more than 100 million pounds of chicken wings will be eaten on Super Bowl Sunday- which is about 1 ¼ billion wings. Think of all those poor wingless chickens!
* 11.2 million pounds of potato chips will be munched on and dipped this day
* Pizza is the number one food for a Super Bowl party
* Surprisingly, grilling hamburgers on this Sunday is second only to the Fourth of July.

I gained three pounds reading these facts. I recall that when my niece got married, she and her husband declared that they would host the family Super Bowl party every year, and they have. When you arrive, you are told to fill out some boxes on a chart for your bets on the game. This is followed by a round of appetizers, with pigs in a blanket being my favorite. One on my nieces makes an excellent taco salad. There is certainly a variety of liquid refreshments, and an interminable wait for the game to start. There are about 15 of us at the party with only about three of us watching the game. The rest of the crowd is discussing upcoming family weddings, the priest who gave a long sermon, the commercials that are viewed. We are smart enough to have another violent sport: any talk of politics. At halftime, lasagna, pizza, and hamburgers make an appearance. Usually someone is having a birthday in a few days so a great birthday cake is served. I usually doze off in the fourth quarter. Every year, I make my announcement that if the Jets ever get into the Super Bowl I will watch it alone since I cannot take all the distractions, but they are welcome to donate food. I am not sure if this will ever happen.

Our lives are made up of many rituals, some small and hardly noticed and some very significant. We have our particular rituals for Thanksgiving Day, for a weddings, baptisms, wedding anniversaries, graduations, and funerals. These rituals are important at key times in our lives to mark important moments and to help us connect to one another and to enter into the good and hard times of life. I would say that most popular ritual we may celebrate is that of birthdays. There must be a cake, the lights must be dimmed, the candles lit, and Happy Birthday sung. Sometimes, someone will horse around during the ritual, but we are saying to the celebrating person without using such words*: this day will not pass without us celebrating that you are here on this earth.* We have our national rituals as we stand at attention with our hands over our hearts as *The Star Spangled Banner* is sung.

Today, we see the Blessed Mother and St. Joseph mark a very ancient Jewish ritual: the presentation of the first male child in the temple in Jerusalem. It is a ritual that would go to the time of Moses and the prophets. The ceremony speaks to the heart as well as the mind: this child, as well as every child, is a gift from God, and the parents come in humility and awe to recognize this profound moment. The temple is a place of worship and the family is recognizing the sacred in the midst of their lives. We the hearers know that the sword predicted by one of the elderly bystanders to one day pierce the heart of Mary will prove to be true three decades later as she stands under the cross of her son. At the moment, Mary makes the ultimate offering of her son to the Father.

One of the very popular words that I often hear from people is that I am spiritual but not religious. I am never exactly sure what a person means by that but I think they may be suggesting they do need rituals and traditions to encounter God. Often this is followed by I do not need to pray in a church, I can go off into the woods and talk to God. I do agree the forest, and all of nature, is a graced reality to encounter the divine. Maybe I am skeptical but I wonder how many people are heading to the woods on Sunday morning to pray. People need rituals in their lives.

Rituals help us to connect to each other and to the mysterious. I might say that they help us to express the untouchable. Certainly our Catholic faith has numerous traditions and rituals. Christ is the light of the world coming into the darkness and we use candles to express this. Water is a most basic symbol of life and we sprinkle water on an infant to claim him or her for God. I spoke about food at a super bowl party. We know food, be it a simply family dinner, a shared sandwich, a cold beer at a ballgame, a champagne toast at a wedding; a festive party has food being part of the essential ritual. Today, at the Mass, the holiest, the most wondrous, the profound offer us the most human elements of food: bread and wine. But in faith, we are not eating bread but encountering the living God who told us he is the bread of life. Do this in memory of me.