

Warren notes hunger for habits linking God to the ordinary

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DALLAS—Liturgy as practiced in everyday life shapes character and connects Christians to “a story bigger than themselves,” author Tish Harrison Warren told a Dallas Baptist University gathering.

Warren, an Anglican priest in Austin and author of *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, the 2018 *Christianity Today* Book of the Year, spoke March 19 as part of the Veritas Lecture series, sponsored by DBU’s Institute for Global Engagement.

When Warren first pitched *Liturgy of the Ordinary* to InterVarsity Press, her editors told her to change the title, because evangelicals wouldn’t buy a book about liturgy. They reversed course after internal staff discussions.

She recalled her editors saying: “We talked to our marketing team. They are all younger and hipper than us, and they told us evangelicals like liturgy.”

The marketing staff discerned an emerging shift among young evangelicals toward renewed interest in ancient practices, she noted. *Liturgy of the Ordinary* became an enduring bestseller.

Warren offered three reasons she believes the theme of liturgy and ordinariness has resonated with many Christians.

• People hunger for “rootedness” as an antidote to consumerism.

“Consumerism is not a big enough story to support the soul,” Warren said.

In particular, she said, ancient liturgical practices offer Christians the opportunity to be part of “a longer story.”

“People are craving something that came before us and will last beyond us, and liturgy is this ancient, enduring thing,” Warren said.

Liturgy “resists trendiness” and offers believers connection to something beyond their own time, place and culture, she observed.

. People desire “formation” in addition to information.

“We are an information-addicted culture. We are a distraction-addicted culture,” Warren said.

She pointed to smartphones as a symbol of current American society. Makers of smartphones care about the habits of consumers, not their attitudes or beliefs.

“Technology companies understand human formation much, much better than the church does,” she said.

Discipleship involves more than simply gaining the right information about God. While doctrine matters, habits and practices shape character and change hearts, she observed.

“The Christian life, I have come to see, is a craft as much as it is a set of beliefs,” she said.

People crave “incarnation as opposed to abstraction.”

Christians can be tempted to profess love for the world in general while demonstrating hateful attitudes toward the actual people they encounter, she said.

“I think we can come to see following Jesus or seeking justice as having the right opinions, using the right hashtags and being a part of the right subgroups in culture but not loving and serving the actual people on our block, or in our dorm, or in our families,” Warren said.

“We’ve come to have something of an excarnate faith—a faith that resists incarnation.”

In contrast, people desperately want to know what God has to do with their actual, everyday lives and the daily challenges they face, she observed. The incarnation of God in the person of Jesus answers that question.

“The incarnation of Jesus that we celebrate every Christmas dealt a deathblow to any spirituality that is abstract,” Warren said. “We don’t serve a God that is far off but one who came in the concrete—in the ordinary.”

A holistic understanding of salvation as formation explains why Jesus lived 30 largely unrecorded years of eating, sleeping and working prior to his public ministry, she said.

“Christ took on our whole humanity—including our ordinariness—and made it beautiful to the Father,” she said. “He healed it.”

No task—no matter how routine or seemingly mundane—can be considered outside the scope of reflecting God’s glory, she observed.

“Because of the incarnation, we believe that God is working—and

wonderfully so—in the concrete of our lives,” Warren said. “The small daily acts of prayer and loving our neighbor are the material he can use to create beauty in ways we can scarcely imagine.”

‘Tap into’ deeper tradition

In a question-and-answer time with cultural theologian Jim Denison, Warren discussed why a growing number of people—particularly young people—are “deconstructing or rejecting white American evangelicalism.”

“I think they are doing that for some really valid reasons. But then they think the only option is pure secularism or knee-jerk progressivism. ... I actually think what people really need is the great tradition of the faith, which predates white evangelicalism, which predates America and which predates white progressivism,” she said.

Liturgical practices enable Christians to “tap into” something deeper than “the most recent shallow traditions,” Warren said.

Ancient liturgy moves Christians “out of the culture wars and into more deeply human questions that people have wrestled with for thousands of years,” she said.

Warren also discussed her decision to give up her position as a weekly *New York Times* columnist after two years.

In part, she felt the need to engage more deeply in “local ministry and counter-cultural community” to resist the temptation to engage in “punditry about God.”

“When God becomes an abstraction you bat about and have debates about more than you sit at his feet and are with him or serve actual human beings that are needy, your soul is in danger,” Warren said.