

Reclaiming the Sacraments
Genesis 1:26-31; John 1:1-18
February 21, 2010
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I. Introduction

New York writer and literary critic Dorothy Parker at one point worked out of a tiny, drab, cubby hole of an office in the Metropolitan Opera House. No one ever visited, and being a social person, she soon became rather lonely. One day a tradesman arrived to paint her name on the sign on Parker's office door, and in classic Dorothy Parker style, instead of her name, she had him paint "GENTLEMEN."

While there are clearly some exceptions, in general, we rely on signs to tell us where we're going, what we can expect. Signs point towards a reality that often we can't see. The signs aren't the reality themselves, but they let us know that the reality is there. When we see smoke, we don't need to see the fire to know that it's there. The sign tells us.

For centuries our church has described sacraments as "outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace." A sacrament is a sign of God's gracious love for us. The sacrament points to and highlights a reality that we can't always see, but that is always there.

We're going to be spending these Sundays in Lent taking a new look at these ancient signs: looking at how they developed, why they have played such an important part in our history, and why they continue to be an essential part of who we are as a community of faith. As most of you know, in the United Methodist Church, we have two sacraments: baptism and communion. This morning, we are going to have a general overview of the sacraments; the two weeks following, we will look at baptism; and the three weeks following that, we're going to look at communion. Every week during Lent, we're going to be celebrating communion, for reasons that I'll address momentarily.

II. Our Sacramental Revival

We have practiced sacraments from the very beginning of the church, although their significance and the number of them has changed over the centuries. The earliest classification of sacraments was by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite in the sixth century who listed three. The list grew to six and then seven, and then many more. The Roman Catholic Church finally settled on seven, two

of which – baptism and communion – are called “dominical sacraments” because they were instituted at the direction of Jesus. By and large, Protestant Churches recognize only those two as true sacraments.

It surprises most Methodists today to hear that in addition to being formed by a commitment to social justice and evangelical piety, John Wesley’s revival was also a sacramental one. This surprises us because many of our churches don’t pay a great deal of attention to the sacraments; and in fact, sacramental worship makes a lot of Methodists uncomfortable.

Part of the reason for this is historical. John and Charles Wesley started Methodism as a revival movement within the Anglican Church; it was never intended to be a separate denomination. The movement was spread by lay (non-ordained) preachers, and Wesley assumed that the preaching services that these preachers led would be a supplement to the regular worship services that people would attend at their local church, which were presided over by an ordained priest.

Priests were the only people authorized to preside over the sacraments, and Wesley expressly forbade his Methodist preachers from holding services at the same time as the Anglican priest: he wanted Methodists to attend both. And that same understanding was true when Methodism moved to America. But when the Revolutionary War started, many of the Anglican priests returned to England, leaving the thriving Methodist communities without anyone to preside at the sacraments.

Even after the American Methodists persuaded Wesley to ordain his own Methodist clergy and send them to America, there were so few that they had to travel around from church to church over a large area. So even though *they* were celebrating communion every week, they might only visit one particular church four times a year; and those times were when the community would celebrate communion. So even though most Methodist churches now have ordained clergy leading services every week, they continue to resist celebrating communion that often.

Wesley, however, believed passionately that sacraments were an essential part of healthy Christian worship. He expected all Methodists to take communion *at least* every week and more if possible; he preached a sermon that we’ll touch on in a few weeks called “*The Duty of Constant Communion*.” He generally took communion every day himself. The sacraments, for Wesley, were one of the primary “means of grace.” A “means of grace” is a tool – a gift – by which God touches and transforms our lives.

All of the classic spiritual disciplines – prayer, fasting, Bible study – are “means of grace.” And since Lent is the time that we focus on our spiritual disciplines, it is an appropriate time to look at the discipline of sacramental worship. I want to look at three elements that are important in our understanding of what sacraments are.

III. Sacramental Characteristics

a. Incarnation

The first factor to note about the sacraments is that they are profoundly incarnational. They are an “*outward and visible sign* of an inward and spiritual grace”; they’re physical, they’re tangible. Now that’s obvious on some level, but it’s worth noting for a couple of reasons. The first reason is that we have some significantly *anti-incarnational* elements to our Christian tradition. We have elements of our tradition that have argued that our physical bodies are not important, that only our spiritual lives are important. That idea is completely counter to the Biblical witness, which is clear that – as we heard in our Hebrew Scripture lesson this morning – God created the physical world and called it good. God created us as physical beings (as well as spiritual beings and intellectual beings) and expresses love to us physically in the sacraments.

This is also an important idea for us as at Metropolitan Memorial because we’re very intellectual people. We love to learn, we love to explore ideas. And while that’s a wonderful gift, it also means that we don’t always pay attention to our physical selves. We often don’t care for our bodies, and we have a very hard time expressing ourselves physically. Take a look at the way we clap (and I’m not pointing fingers, you won’t see me clap until I can watch someone with rhythm get started!).

But we *are* physical, and we absorb information physically. Our Gospel reading tells us that “the Word became *flesh* and dwelt among us.” We all know this about infants and children – we all know that infants need a certain amount of physical contact if they’re going to develop in a healthy way – but we sometimes discount its impact on us as adults. I can tell you that I love you, and that’s an important thing to do, but I can also give you a hug; that communicates the same reality in a different way. And we need both; we need to hear the words, we need to experience the touch. In listening to the words of Scripture and the sermon, we hear God’s word of “I love you.” In the sacraments, we experience that love physically.

b. Community

A second critical element of sacramental worship is that it is communal. Our relationship with God is both an individual and a communal one. Part of it involves my personal “yes” to God’s gracious offer of relationship. But part of it is *our* yes, to God’s covenantal promise; and – as we have discussed before – the Biblical witness is crystal clear, that it is our communal relationship with God that is primary.

It is our communal relationship with God that gives birth to, and nurtures, our individual relationship with God. It is in community that we learn about what it looks like to be in relationship with God, and where we have the support structures to sustain

us in that journey. As John Wesley said with some regularity, “the Bible knows *nothing* of solitary religion.” This is a word that our society – a society filled with people who say they are “spiritual, but not religious” – desperately needs to hear.

Sacraments are *never* celebrated individually. We don’t baptize people privately, because baptism is a *communal* covenant (we’ll talk more about this next week). The Lord’s Supper is *never* celebrated individually. We sometimes take communion that has been consecrated to the bedside of a sick person, but the consecration happens in the gathered community. Sacraments are an expression of our covenant life together.

c. Mystery

The third element of our sacramental discipline is that it is ultimately a mystery. I know that we often toss that phrase around when we don’t understand something; but in this case, the Latin word *Sacramentum* really does mean “mystery,” and was used to translate the Greek, μυστήριον (secret or mystery). The term refers to the fact that while God is clearly and powerfully present in the sacraments, *how* God is present and active is ultimately unknowable to us. There has been a lot of ink spilled (and blood, as well) over the various ways that God is present in the sacraments – transubstantiation, consubstantiation, “real presence” – all terms to try and help us understand how the miracle happens.

I’m grateful that the “how’s” of the miracle were of very little interest to John Wesley. He didn’t get caught up in the theological speculation that separated so many churches and theologians. What he simply affirmed over and over again was that God was uniquely and powerfully present in the sacraments in ways that transformed lives, and he insisted that his Methodist followers take advantage of that.

IV. Conclusion

Larry Stookey, who was a long-time professor at Wesley Theological Seminary, tells a story about pastoring a church, and there was an older member of the congregation who had been in a nursing home for some time wrestling with dementia. Larry would visit her periodically, and she never spoke to him, and did not seem particularly aware that he was there.

One day, Larry brought communion to her in the home, and after he had given her the elements, he sat with her in silence. And she turned to him and spoke the only words he had heard her utter: “God really does love us, doesn’t he.”

That's the power of the sacraments. Sacraments touch us in ways that we can't understand, and in ways that operate beyond our level of understanding, but that shape us and transform us into the people that God has called us to be. As we journey through Lent together, I invite you to join in these great gifts – the means of grace – through which we become the Body of Christ.

Amen.