



“Toward a Sacramental Community”

1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Matthew 28:16-20

Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

October 4, 2009

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

I am never more conscious of my humanity than when I take a child in my arms and, using words two thousand years old, baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In that holy moment, we believe God comes to us in ways both mysterious and powerful.

When I hold up the simple gifts of bread and cup and invoke those ancient words that echo down through the centuries, “The body of Christ; the blood of Christ,” I believe God comes to us and creates a sacred meal. In that moment, I am quite conscious I am very human.

It is humbling to stand at the intersection of time and eternity on behalf of God and in your service. In such moments I am struck by the audacity of any human being, especially me, to dare hold holy things in his hands. As St. Paul once put it, “who is adequate for such things.” It’s a rhetorical question. No one is adequate. We’re all in over our heads.

And yet we do stand in this holy place and engage in sacred tasks.

I am struck by my humanity in these sacred moments because I am conscious that in such holy moments, we stand in the presence of eternity. We are handling holy things that are quite ordinary: water, bread, wine. Yet God comes to make these common things sacred. Some of my most precious memories in life are sacramental moments such as these we are experiencing this morning.

And the most wonderful thing of all is that these moments touch the common stuff of our humanity and make us and this community sacred. I stand and work here in the center of it all with a profound sense of privilege. In other words, I take this work very seriously! Here, up front and center, we stand on holy ground. On your behalf and in the service of eternity, I handle holy things for your sake. I think I understand St. Paul’s metaphor for ministry, “we hold this treasure in earthen vessels.”

You join me here on holy ground. God comes to us, all of us in word, sacrament and the fellowship that binds this community of faith together.

Here, up front and center, we celebrate great moments of life. Today we celebrated the birth of Sloane Morgan Briggs. Many of you have stood in this same spot and given your child back to God and into the protection of this community of faith. What greater gift than a child, and what higher holy moment than this moment when we receive them into the church with the open arms of Christ’s love? Baptism is a covenantal and sacramental act that binds us to God and to one another.

In a few moments we will come to the Lord’s Table and enter what the church calls “Holy Communion.” It’s another high and holy moment in your life and in the life of the

Plymouth Church
Sermon 4 October 09

church. We gather here on this spot for marriage when couples enter “the covenant of marriage.”

And, of course, we come here to this same spot at the end of life to mourn loved ones who’ve passed into eternity and to celebrate their life and faith. This is holy ground.

Along that long journey from birth to death, we gather here for other high and holy moments. We come to this holy table where God promises to feed our souls, strengthen our faith and give grace for the journey. Every seventh day, the Lord’s Day, we gather to meet the Risen One and to hear the Word that bears the power of God. Conversations in and around the hour of worship continue the work of God in us and this community.

The holy ground extends to every corner of this room and into every person gathered on any Lord’s Day in the Lord’s house doing business with the Lord. After all, we believe that in word and sacrament, in the community of the faithful, God comes to us. The very center of the Christian faith is the conviction that God is engaged in this world, that God reaches into the world and our lives which makes the entire creation, including us, sacred. The water of baptism and the bread and cup of communion are signs that God touches the ordinary with grace – when and if we take it seriously.

God comes to us in ordinary ways, and when we open our lives to God’s presence, something happens. It’s called spiritual formation. The steady exposure of our lives to God over time creates transformations large and small. It takes time and it requires multiple exposures and, above all, it requires openness to God, but over time God makes us less what we are and more what God wants us to be.

A primary means of that growth is participation in the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. Each baptism reminds us we are baptized people and God has a claim on our lives. They are food for the soul. Baptism reminds us we are members of a covenantal community and we are bound to each other with cords of love. The sacred table reminds us of the central act of God that redeems us and binds us to God’s heart: the cross. There Christ poured out his life on behalf of the world. At the table, we open our lives to that sacrifice and all its benefits. Here God feeds us with sufficient grace for the journey. And every sacred ritual has a corresponding social consequence. These are events that form our community and bind us to one another.

As long as there has been a Christian faith there have been a sacred meal and a sacred rite of initiation. The Christian movement was born in the water of baptism. The early Christians believed that baptism linked them to God and to one another in bands of love. From the first, Christians have been fed at the sacred table of the Lord. We believe the sacred meal links us to Christ and his cross; we believe the table is a community feast that binds us to each other in covenantal love and commitment.

Today, a Lord’s Day in October 2009, the water of baptism and the bread and cup of the table are celebrated in hundreds of languages and myriad of forms around the world. We join the celebration and are linked to the universal church – and to the historic Christian church through the centuries.

Over the centuries the church has disputed the meaning of the sacraments and developed many ways of doing the sacraments, but Christians always and everywhere agree that baptism and Holy Communion are not only significant, but each bears the weight of eternity. Sacraments link us to eternity – and to the universal and historic church.

In our tradition there is a tendency to neglect the sacraments. We do so at the expense of our spiritual formation. One of the great Congregational theologians of the last century, C. H. Dodd, put it, “A non-sacramental Christianity tends to become non-supernatural...which is not distinctively Christian because it has lost the living link with history.”

But the sacraments are being rediscovered in our time. We're learning to appreciate mystery. Not everything in the world can be explained, certainly not God's way with us. There is a necessary mystery inherent in faith. We're also rediscovering the power of ancient traditions and experiencing the power of the rituals attached to our great tradition. To quote another famous Congregational theologian, P. T. Forsythe, "Prayer is a gift and a sacrifice that we make; sacrament is a gift and sacrifice that God makes. In prayer we go to God; in sacrament God comes to us."

Sacramental Christianity is not belief in some form of magic, and certainly not a resort to superstition. In its simplest form, a sacrament is a vessel bearing the grace of God. It's the ordinary in the employ of the divine. As John Calvin, the father of the Reformed Faith, put it, sacraments "sustain, nourish, confirm and increase our faith. They are ministers of the Holy Spirit."

Sacraments are signs that God is invested in this real world – and in each of us – and God is working in the real world – and in us. While there are only two church sacraments, baptism and communion, the whole world is sacramental. God always comes to us in human forms and by human means.

God uses a variety of vessels to bring us that grace. If we pay attention, the world itself reminds us of God's creative power and in nature we experience God's power. People bring us God's grace in powerful and profound ways. Communities of faith, like this one, are filled with God's grace. But we have to pay attention.

Being a sacramental community means seeing and receiving God's coming to us and doing so in surprising and powerful ways. The beauty of a desert sunset or a soaring mountain are signs that all creation bears the mark of the creator – and bears the power of God to us. A simple flower blossom or a healing word from a friend both bear the grace of God to us. Our work, play, families, friends – all of life bears the potential to bring God's grace to us. The fine arts and the clumsy drawing of a child each are vessels bearing grace – if we are paying attention.

Here in the community of faith, life is filled with vessels bearing grace to us. Word, sacrament, coffee hour, conversations on the street, study and prayer in corner rooms, all of it whether joyous and/or serious bears potential to form our souls.

And all of it intends to keep us in touch with eternity. And we need reminding!

Several years ago, one of my young colleagues annoyed the rest of us at staff meetings. He was continually checking his Blackberry to see what was going on in his life. I gently suggested to him that he could turn it off – or ignore it – for one hour a week.

He resisted. "You have to stay connected," he argued. "No you don't," I replied. "In fact you would be a better minister if you disconnected from time to time." "No," he always replied, "You have to keep in touch."

While I'm not convinced that any of us have to stay that much in touch, I do know that we need to work at keeping in touch with eternity. Regular participation in the sacraments keeps us in touch with God who comes to us in those sacramental moments. And, like all of church life, the sacraments have a powerful social dimension. They keep us in touch with each other. We come to the table together not as isolated individual units.

We're forgetful, so God reminds us to stay in touch quite regularly and often surprisingly. Word and sacrament, formal vessels of grace, are accompanied by relationships that are also a means of grace.

All of it, the large sacramental moments and the more ordinary moments in community life are, in fact, a very big deal. Frankly, they are as large as we make them.

Plymouth Church
Sermon 4 October 09

If you haven't already, open your soul – and your mouth – for God comes to us here and now, at this table, in that water, and in each other. That is good news indeed.

Amen

© David C. Fisher, 2009