



**SUNNYVALE**

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*From the Pulpit*

**Sermon: “Discovering God... in the Sacraments”**

The Rev. Dr. Steve Harrington ~ February 7, 2010

**Luke 24:28-30**

**Psalm 103:1-8**

It would be interesting to see how different ones of us would order and rank the value of the different kinds of communications available to us today when it comes to strengthening our relationships with other people. For instance, assuming that you would be glad to hear from a particular person, I'm pretty sure most of us would prefer a personal text or e-mail to the mass circulation of a twitter tweet or Facebook post. *But* a phone call or a handwritten note is better than a text or Facebook post. *And* -- again assuming you would *like* to hear from your friend -- a personal face-to-face visit is best of all.

In terms of relationships that are important to us, the more real and tangible the contact can be, the better it is. We Presbyterians celebrate 2 sacraments that communicate to us important spiritual truths in real and tangible ways. Our 2 sacraments are baptism and communion. Last week we baptized Josiah Hejmanowski. In that service the physical presence of the water reminded us of our God whose grace sustains us and is as central to life as water is to survival. The waters of baptism speak to us of cleansing and refreshment; they remind us of the people of God delivered through the waters of the flood, who passed through the parted Red Sea and who crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land. And of course the water speaks to us of Jesus who waded into the waters of the world's sin to stand in solidarity with us. Baptism recognizes that we all have to be washed and cleansed and refreshed by the grace of God.

As a sacrament baptism symbolizes one's entrance into the covenant community -- it's the sign and seal, much like adoption papers, that the baptized one now belongs to this family of faith -- and, through the bonds of the spirit, to the church universal. Each time we baptize here in the sanctuary we all are invited to remember our *own* baptisms and to give thanks that *we also* have been brought into this community of faith and are part of the family of God.

But listen, our being part of the family is not just an honorary or ceremonial position that has no other impact or claim upon our lives. Just like any family, we have family chores that need to be done as we work towards what we pray for in the Lord's Prayer: "Thy will be done, *on earth...* as it is in heaven." The process of physically putting water on the child's head reminds us

that this is not some removed and esoteric spiritual ritual but something that takes place in the real world and which plunges us into genuine acts of service in that world.

While we only baptize a person once (I mean who would adopt a child a 2nd time?) *communion* is a sacrament that we repeat often because it calls us to remember God's love revealed to us in Jesus Christ and because *through* communion we are renewed in faith and strengthened by God's grace. We don't believe the bread and juice literally become the body and blood of Christ but in a very real and tangible way, through this sacrament, we commune with God and experience the reality of Jesus crucified for our sins and raised for our salvation. In the broken bread and poured out cup Jesus, on the night of his arrest, transformed the Passover meal into a new covenant made possible by his death and resurrection. We remember in the sacrament of communion the cost and consequence of our sin; we remember in the sacrament of communion the extent of God's love for us; we remember in the sacrament of communion that Jesus has opened for us a way into the presence of God.

This is why in the reformed tradition the minister does not stand between the table and the people when ministering at the table: because the way to God is made open to us by Jesus alone. It is *Christ* who is our mediator not the minister. In fact, this is why on communion Sundays I don't preach out in the center of the chancel but here the pulpit -- so as to not stand between the church and the sacrament of grace.

I like what our passage from Luke's gospel tells us about the sacrament today. 2 disciples -- one of whom we know to be a man named Cleopas -- are walking out of Jerusalem on that first Easter afternoon. They have heard the rumors and reports of Jesus' resurrection but they can't believe it. As they walk the road, dejected and hopeless, the resurrected Christ *himself* joins them along the way and walks with them. They don't recognize Jesus and Luke reports just the faintest hints of what must have been a fascinating conversation as Jesus unfolded for them the Scriptures concerning himself.

But towards the end of the day as they are drawing close to the village of Emmaus, Jesus acted as though he was going to keep on walking until they persuaded him to stop and stay the night with them. At the table that night Jesus took the bread, blessed and broke it... and their eyes were opened and they recognized him! Notice that it's in the breaking of the bread -- *in the sacrament* -- that Jesus is recognized.

In the remembered act of the breaking of the bread the disciples see and believe. They who were bereft of hope and broken in spirit -- they who could not believe the resurrection reports of their friends and who could not perceive the risen Christ who walked with them along the way -- they who were blind of faith and deaf of heart -- who could not hear the good news that was told them or even when it walked alongside of them... they finally see and recognize Christ in the breaking of the bread.

For some, no doubt, the sacraments are merely ancient ritual and religious irrelevance. But for us... for us the tangible reality of the bread broken and the cup poured out -- the vivid remembrance of a life given so that *eternal* life may be received -- well, they are poignant experiences of grace through which we recognize God.

You know, in this flu season we've been taking some precautions to try to be mindful of how we can minimize health risks. We've not been having greeters at the door -- as an expression of our hospitality: to care for you and your health. We've not been holding hands at

the end of our service and we've been cutting up the bread so that the loaf is not passed around during this season of concern.

Well a few months ago I received in the mail this box which contains 3 individualized, purity-sealed, communion cups offered as samples of what they hoped I would order. They look like little coffee creamer's but there are actually 2 seals on the top. You pull back the first seal and you have a little hard round unleavened wafer to eat -- I've heard these called Jeese-its! And then the 2nd seal gets you down to the juice. We can understand the idea and motivation behind this but I'm fascinated by what they write in their brochure: "Each individual serving is pre-packed, purity sealed and virtually germ-free. Each serving is prepared in a hygienic facility that adheres to strict FDA standards. The result is worship without worry."

Worship without worry: *that* worries me. What we discover in the sacrament of communion -- what we discover about God at this table -- is that God in Jesus Christ comes into the reality, the woundedness, the germs and dirt and discouragement of our world. What we discover about God in the sacrament is a Savior who wades into the waters of our sin to stand with us -- a Christ who commits himself to sacrifice on our behalf. What we discover in the sacrament of communion is that is neither removed nor irrelevant to the concerns of life but very much a part of its salvation. The God we recognize in Jesus Christ at this table is *not* a God who is aloof and above but one who gives himself for the healing of the world.

To partake of this communion is not to take into ourselves some kind of immunity from the contamination of the world. To take this communion is not to seal ourselves off from the hurt and the hunger that people suffer. To take this communion is not to escape the worry of the world or receive inoculation from its problems and pains. What we recognize about God at the table is that in Jesus God enters into the grit and garbage of our world and becomes a healing presence by giving himself to it.

The idea that communion could be this silver-chaliced-clergy-robed-isolated-through-the-beauty-and-protection-of-the-sanctuary-sacrament is crazy! To take communion today is to take into ourselves the very seeds of our own destruction -- it is to drink death to ourselves that we may be filled with the life of Christ; it is to be broken open and poured out for others. What we discover about God in the sacraments is that God is for us in the real and tangible ways; and so we must live lives of faith and faithfulness in real and tangible ways to bring hope and healing to the world. Amen.