

Signs of Community

Pentecost XI

Deuteronomy 6:4-12, 20-25; March 14:22-25

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Reflect with me for just a few moments what we have experienced together in this community of faith where we have celebrated the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. If you were raised in the Roman Catholic tradition, you would expect that there would be seven sacraments, but it doesn't really matter how we name these particular rites and ceremonies and rituals. In our Protestant tradition, it has been Baptism and the Lord's Supper that have been designated as the sacraments of the Church, sacraments which we have understood to be visible signs of invisible grace. Or, we have spoken of them as means of grace, conveyors of grace, the grace of God, through the participation in the sacraments. Someone has called the sacrament the visible Word and, if we were true to our tradition, we would have pulpit and table at every service, for the Word explicates the action, and the action embodies and symbolizes the Word. We do it backwards here; we really should have the reflection first, so that when you came to participate, you would know what you were doing. But, now you are going to have to hear what you just did and then go home and think about it, you see. That is liturgically incorrect, but we do it this way so that the children can be a part of it, as well.

It is important for us, on occasion, to think about the sacraments of the Church, which I like to call the *signs of community*. I intentionally named Baptism in the liturgy the Rite of Initiation, because that is what it is. It is the marking, the signing of a child as belonging to the community. We only baptize once. You can only come into the community once, and once you are in that community, signed and sealed by the Spirit of God, you are marked forever.

This rite of the Table is a rite of commemoration, and we do it again and again in order that we may go back and be reminded of our founding story, of that font from which our tradition has arisen. We go back to the table and we remember Jesus, we think about his life and his death and his resurrection, and we remember what has constituted us as a people. We remember and we find hope, and in the experience, we do sense that presence, that grace.

I find in this congregation, and it may be true generally, that Baptism is so very strong. Someone suggested one time that when we do baptisms here, there really ought to be Kleenex in the hymnal rack. We have before us a beautiful child, and there are parents full of awe and wonder, feeling the gift and also the responsibility. There is the extended family, grandparents, aunts and uncles and cousins, as well as the extended community, and we all take responsibility for these little ones. I find that the celebration of Baptism here is deeply appreciated and is strongly observed.

I find the Eucharist that we have just celebrated is less so. If you were raised in the Catholic tradition or the Anglican tradition, you would be hungry for the sacrament. In the 16th century, at the time of the Reformation, in order to rescue the sacrament of the Lord's Supper from some abuses, the Reformers decided to celebrate it only four times a year, and then to celebrate it with great solemnity and to have a service of preparation beforehand. Actually, what happened was, rather than elevating and lifting the sacrament in its importance and centrality, what really happened to those of us who grew up on quarterly communion was that we lost the appetite for it. At the 8:30 service, two-thirds of the people leave every week instead of participating at the rail. They are not hungry or thirsty and that is not any criticism, it's just a fact. The sacrament, for them, is not such that mediates a grace that makes them want to come every week to the rail.

So, we are all conditioned and determined much by our experience and our practice and our observance. But, nonetheless, one way or another, we celebrate Baptism in great joy, and some of us are very hungry for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and others less-so; it's still enough to do it maybe a half a dozen times a year.

These are signs of community, the marks of belonging, the coming-in, initiation. And then the remembrance, the repetition, the re-presentation, so that we remember that past act, that hopefully becomes for us a present moment of experience, instilling hope in our hearts.

We are not a sacramentarian church. A sacramentarian communion, such as the Roman Catholic Church or the Anglican Church or high Lutheran, invests the sacrament with far more power or mystery than we do. For example, the panic about getting a baby baptized in a sacramentarian tradition is that, if a child is not baptized, the original sin is not removed, and so there is that immediacy about it, and there is a fear lest the sacrament should fail to be celebrated, because in a sacramentarian tradition, the grace is attached to the act. No act, no grace. In the Lord's Supper, the priest has an indelible gift through ordination by which the transformation of bread and cup into body and blood, that miracle of the mass, can be transacted. Now, I don't have any such power. But, in the sacramentarian tradition, that bread and cup become body and blood, and Christ is received in the sacrament. If you weren't raised in those traditions, I doubt that you can ever fully appreciate what someone who was nurtured in that tradition

experiences at the communion rail. That is the central act of worship for a good Roman Catholic in their worship observance. It is to receive bread and cup, thus receiving Christ, literally.

Our understanding of it is more difficult to explain. We don't want to say they are just empty signs, and yet, how do you find that in-between that says one communes spiritually on these physical elements? That is what we try to say. But, in any case, we are not sacramentarian in seeing the grace attached to the action. We pray over the action for the Spirit to make that which is symbolized in the act spiritually present to us. I think sometimes it works, and certainly sometimes it doesn't. But, for us, these are signs of community. There is no magic here; there is no superstition connected with it.

Last week I suggested that religion was that search for meaning, a very natural and normal, human activity, universal human activity before the Mystery of Life. What does it mean? Who am I? From whence have I come and whither am I going - these are the religious questions that we wrestle with. Our respective religions are the human imaginative constructs that we have put together. Someone had a vision, someone had a story, a founding story that found resonance in the lives of a community of people who formed a tradition so that here we are, two thousand years after the table experience, the death and resurrection of Jesus, still telling that story. We are a community that has a sign reminding us of our founding. And we continue to observe this, even though we don't believe that it fell out of heaven.

The early community came finally to this practice and then the institutional Church, as it took shape and form, formalized those practices. We are not a sacramentarian church that believes somehow or other that the act and the grace are synonymous. We recognize that, in the birth and maturing of the Church, these ritual actions became significant as the identity of the community is that which helps us to understand who we are, as signs that keep us going, keep us being reminded, keep us encouraged and inspired and giving us hope. These are signs of community. They could be other than they are, and certainly they are going to have to be understood differently than when they were first initiated, because the whole religious, cultural, historical situation of this community is so far different from that original community. The whole life experience is so strikingly different.

And yet, what was really needed there, that mystery, that experience of the holy and the sacred, it is for that same experience that we long. That is why we come; that is why we have gathered. And so, we could change these sacraments, but it would take a long, long time for another action to be invested with all of the emotional binding of our present stories and our present sacraments.

We don't baptize out of some panicky feeling that if the child were not baptized, the child would be lost. We baptize because we believe the child is born into a covenant of faith and a family of faith. It is a community sign.

So, we have taken the bread, the cup and we have remembered, but we have not had some kind of mystical experience with the literal body and blood, but these signs are that which bind us together as a community and give us that sense of identity that makes us one family gathered around Jesus, around the story of Jesus' life, around his death. When body and blood are separated, there is violence, there is death. We remember that Jesus died the way he died because he lived the way he lived, and in his death he set us free from that bondage to the darkness. And so, we have been reminded of our story, that which is the center of our life together.

Signs of community are those mediators of grace, vehicles by which the presence of the holy and the sacred become tangible, bringing into our experience that dimension of the sacred or of God. Certainly that is why we continue in a community of faith to celebrate rites of passage, surrounding them with holy moments. How can you celebrate a birth without standing in awe before the fountain of life? How can you speak vows to each other for life without the sense of the presence of the Other? How can you possibly bury one whom you have dearly loved without that sense that God is there? And so, as a community of faith, we have signs of community that bind us together, that help us to understand who we are and to bring to us those moments which are simply holy.

This past week I performed perhaps the most unusual ceremony of my life on a beautiful sailboat out in the middle of Lake Michigan. The groom, one whom I have known for a long time, the bride Russian. As we went out on the sail, the bride's daughter, seventeen years old, multi-lingual, able to go from Russian to English, dialed her grandparents, the parents of the bride, in Russia, and somewhere in the middle of Russia, the parents of the bride tuned in to the ceremony which was translated by their granddaughter so that they could enter into the celebration with us. So, when I spoke about the two rosebuds that represented those Russian parents, they were told. And when I mentioned the ring which was gold melted from a bracelet that the father had given the mother on the day that the bride was born, they could remember. And when the vows were spoken, I gave the English translation to the daughter who read the vows in Russian so that the bride could respond in Russian, and her parents listening all the while. And when I spoke the meditation from I Corinthians 13, because we were literally bridging two worlds, I spoke of love that transcends all differences and all distance, and the granddaughter preached my little sermon. And when I concluded the declaration – knowing that they were Eastern Orthodox for whom the Trinity is important – in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, I doubt that there were not tears in Russia for what was being transacted in the middle of Lake Michigan.

Why do we do such things? Why do we go through all that fuss? They are no more married than if they had gone to the Justice of the Peace. They are no more married, than if they had gone to City Hall in Red Square, Moscow. We do it because we know that we are meaning-seeking animals, aware of what we are

doing, conscious of our actions and our decisions, and knowing that there is a Mystery before which or before Whom we live which we cannot fathom, which will never be dissected rationally or set forth in intellectual discourse, but which can be felt now and again, when grace brushes us and the dimension of the sacred encompasses us, and all we can say is, "My God!"