

Church Words: Sacrament Sunday, 11/5/17

1 Have you ever noticed how many strange words are used in church or in talking about church? Last week I gave you a rant about the word “narthex” and threatened buy an “aspergillum,” which is what priests use to sprinkle holy water on people. Church words like that are unnecessarily obscure and need updating. On the other hand, there are some church words that can bring us deeply into the presence of God. Many of them appear to be simple words but actually have deep and multifaceted meanings. In this short worship series, we’re explore just three of these words: holy, sacrament, and grace. Some of the other church words you nominated on your response cards last week for future sermons include: Forgiveness, accepting, giving, sanctification, justification, eschatology, and glossolalia. Oh, that’s a mouthful! Glossolalia! If you think of more today, you can jot them down on the back of your response cards.

2 We’re continuing the series today with the word “sacrament.” A sacrament is “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.”¹ In the Protestant (that is, not Catholic) tradition of the Christian Church, we observe two religious rituals with special importance: Baptism and Communion. We call these *sacraments*, with that word coming from the Greek term meaning *mystery*. The sacraments are mysterious because they represent a coming into the presence of God in a way that transcends our vocabulary and understanding.

United Methodists recognize only two sacraments, while the Catholic Church recognizes seven sacraments, adding Confirmation, Reconciliation, Anointing the Sick, Marriage, and Holy Orders to the list. Why only two for us? Because of the seven, only two (Baptism and Communion) were rituals that Jesus both participated in and commanded his followers to do. As United Methodists, we freely participate in many different practices or disciplines that allow us to experience more of God’s grace, but only two are recognized with the extra solemnity of a sacrament.

In the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, ordinary things like water, bread, and juice are blessed and become holy, or set apart in a special way for God and for

¹ Anglicansonline.org/basics/catechism.html#The Sacraments

God's purposes. We can't see Jesus in the bread or the Holy Spirit in the water with our eyes, but we believe they are mysteriously there somehow and given to us as a gift. Because they are gifts that can't be earned, in the United Methodist Church we freely welcome anyone to participate in a sacrament who desires to be closer to Jesus. In other words, you don't have to be a member, be a certain age, or prove that you understand a sacrament before you receive it. Sacraments are a gift from God. The church is simply the normal way God calls us together as the Body of Christ to share in the sacraments.

In the United Methodist Church, we teach that pastors don't have special power to stand in between you and God as an intermediary, or go-between, either in the sacraments or even in prayer. Jesus is the only intermediary you really need. However, sacraments in our church are usually lead by an ordained minister like me. I'm not sure this would have been important to Jesus, but in our church, it's one way of making sure these important rites are done respectfully and prayerfully, recalling the times in the Bible that Jesus gave us these sacraments and offering them freely to all who are drawn to participate.

3 Let's talk about baptism first because baptism is the starting point in the spiritual life of all Christians. When we dunk (or sprinkle or splash) a person in the waters of baptism, we remember and reenact that moment when Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, as recorded in all four of the Gospels. Washing with water dramatically illustrates on the outside what God's Spirit mysteriously does for us on the inside. The water also is a reminder that in baptism we die to our old life apart from Christ and are reborn as a part of the Body of Christ, the Christian Church. By definition, any Christian is really a "born-again" Christian, given new life in the Holy Spirit upon receiving Holy Baptism.

If baptism is so beneficial to us, why don't we do it more often? The simple answer is that Jesus only did it once. The longer answer is that when we move from one church to another church, or even one denomination to another, we believe that the same Spirit of God that came into your life at your baptism goes with you, wherever you go. In other words, you are baptized into the family of followers of Jesus, not into any particular denomination of local church. Also, there's nothing you can do to become "unbaptized." To be "rebaptized" would imply that the value of the sacrament comes from you or the people who are in charge of it, rather than from God.

4 Does that mean that once you've been baptized you've got your golden ticket to heaven? There's long been disagreement on how baptism relates to salvation among different Christian faith traditions. People used to wait to be baptized until they were on their death beds, assuming that once they were cleansed of their sin through baptism, they'd have a lesser chance of committing new sins if they waited until they were about to die. Others rush to baptize their babies, assuming that if they die before they are baptized, they're going to hell. What we teach, and what John Wesley taught, is that we are saved by God's grace alone. Baptism doesn't save us anymore than any other thing we can do. Instead, baptism is what Wesley called an "ordinary means"² of receiving God's grace. Baptism doesn't save us, and failure to be baptized doesn't damn us. Baptism does start our spiritual journey in a new and mysterious way through the Holy Spirit, so waiting until the end of your life to be baptized is denying yourself the one thing you most need to grow in your faith.

What do I have to do to be baptized? You have to decide that you want to follow Jesus, leaving behind evil, sin, and self-centeredness and growing in your love of God and God's people, becoming Christ centered. If that's you, and you haven't been baptized, I would be thrilled to talk with you about that! If you're a parent, grandparent, or sponsor of a child, then you have to decide that for yourself and also promise to raise your child in the Christian faith, including your presence, prayers, service, gifts, and witness in a Christian church. Again, you can make my day by asking me to baptize you or your child!

5 If baptism is so important, why don't we wait for people to "grow up" so they can make the decision to be baptized on their own? Well, sometimes we do. Is there anyone here today who was baptized an adult? The decision of when to be baptized is always up to the parent or, as they grow older, the individual. Oftentimes it's not until well into our adult years that we first feel or respond to the tug of God on our hearts to draw close to Jesus. We offer baptism to infants and adults because we believe that the goodness of baptism comes about as a result of God's grace, not our mental maturity or understanding. In a sense, we are all infants in our understanding of the things of God, entirely dependent on God's provision and inspiration. However, when we baptize infants or children, we do ask them to confirm

² By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism, p. 1

the baptismal vows taken on their behalf when they've grown older. That's what Christian Confirmation is all about.

If you're wanting to dive more deeply into the history and theology surrounding the sacrament of Holy Baptism, I commend to you a free paper offered online by the United Methodist General Board of Discipleship- *By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism*.

6 Holy Communion is in some ways a more complicated sacrament than Baptism- not in how we administer the ritual, but in terms of the different ideas encompassed in the sacrament. For example, there are differing views about the basic meaning of Communion. At one level, when we break the bread and drink the cup we remember and reenact the night that Jesus shared his last Passover meal with the disciples. The breaking of the bread and the drinking from the cup reminds us that just as Jesus gave his life for us, we also are called to give our lives in selfless service to our neighbors. However, as United Methodists, we believe that this is more than just a remembrance, that Christ is somehow present in the bread and the juice in a spiritual sense. On the other hand, we don't go as far as the Roman Catholic doctrine that the bread actually becomes the body of Christ, and the juice becomes the blood of Christ.

7 And then there are all the different names and references for this sacrament. The *Lord's Supper* reminds us of the roots of this sacrament in the sharing of the Passover Meal. The *Eucharist* comes from the Greek term for thanksgiving. On Communion Sundays at our 10:30 worship service, we celebrate the ritual called *The Great Thanksgiving*, remembering and thanking God for the many ways God has provided for us and our spiritual ancestors. The term *Communion* is simply an acknowledgement that when we approach the altar of God to receive the bread and the cup, we are seeking to commune, or draw into close relationship with, God. Catholics use the term *Mass*, which is a Latin reference to the blessing and sending out God's people in mission to the world. Holy Communion is also both a time to bare our souls before God in *confession*, and receive the assurance of God's *forgiveness*.

8 There are also many different ways to celebrate Holy Communion. Sometimes we use flatbread, like the unleavened bread that Jesus used to celebrate the Passover meal.

Sometimes we dip the bread in the cup- that's called intinction- and sometimes we each drink from a smaller cup. In some traditions, everybody still drinks from the one cup as a sign that we're all one Body of Christ. I remember once having a tug of war with someone once who insisted on taking the cup from my hands and drinking from it! We sometimes talk of *taking* Communion, but I've always preferred *receiving* communion because it emphasizes that this is a means of receiving God's grace. Usually we receive Holy Communion at church, but sometimes we're at home or in a hospital. There are many different traditions and setting, and many different preferences, but only one God, one Spirit, and one Lord over all of them. Just as God is the one who makes Holy Baptism effective, the same is true for Holy Communion.

Who's eligible to receive Holy Communion in our church? Everyone. Period. All, that is, except perfect people. But seeing none here in attendance, we won't worry about that! The good news is that there is absolutely nothing you can do to disqualify yourself from the privilege of approaching God with a humble heart, looking for forgiveness. We teach and practice that Holy Communion is a means of grace available to anyone who wants to draw closer to Jesus. You don't have to be baptized and you don't even have to have your mind made up about Jesus- John Wesley believed, and I believe, that even the act of coming forward to receive communion can be used by God's Spirit to convince a person of the spiritual reality of the lordship of Jesus.

If you're wanting to dive more deeply into the history and theology surrounding the sacrament of Holy Communion, I commend to you another free paper offered online by the United Methodist General Board of Discipleship- *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion*.

9 I wonder if there's someone here today who's held back, feeling unready or undeserving of receiving Holy Baptism or Holy Communion. I hope you'll come forward today for Holy Communion and talk with me about receiving Holy Baptism. The water and the table are for you- not because you deserve them, but because God loves you!

Please pray with me. *Holy God, sacrament can be a confusing, too familiar, or even a painful church word. Search our hearts and grow in us an insatiable appetite and love for your sacraments, knowing that they are given so that we might receive your love more fully.*



Buffalo United Methodist Church

...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!



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