

## **“SIMPLE GIFTS”**

Romans 12:1-8, 2 Corinthians 4:5-7

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In the church, when we think about God’s gifts to us, our starting point is the sacraments. When we talk about the sacraments, we use words like “holy” and “special.” We call the sacraments “means of grace” and “signs of Christ’s presence in our midst.” For just about all Christians who practice them, the sacraments are sacred rituals, moments of particular awareness of God’s presence. This is true whether they sprinkle a baby’s head with water or immerse adults wearing white robes in a river, whether they kneel in a cathedral to drink wine from a chalice or quietly pass a loaf of bread around a small circle as they remember Jesus’ sacrificial death.

That sense of the sacred is probably what led to the vast accumulation of ideology and tradition around the sacraments – theological reflection from many different perspectives, rituals and gestures and words, many layers of meaning ... all of which gives richness to our practice.

It shouldn’t surprise us, though, that along the way, various rules developed – to give directions for practicing the sacraments, to instruct people about their meaning, to keep traditions intact, to preserve that sacredness. And although they were different in different times and places and among different groups, the rules also defined who could participate in the sacraments, how one became “eligible” to participate, and also what might disqualify someone from participation. They made it clear that the sacraments belong to the church: God’s gifts for God’s people.

Not-very-surprisingly, the more developed the church’s sacramental theologies and practices became, the more differences emerged between different groups of Christians. Two sacraments, as in our Presbyterian tradition, or five, or seven? Baptize only adult believers? Or children, too? Does the bread literally become Jesus’ body? Is it just a reminder, nothing more? Is communion a somber or joyful experience? Can children partake? Do you have to be baptized first? Do we need a clergy person? Can I be baptized again? What do I have to believe in order to be baptized? Wine or grape juice? How important is it to understand what it’s all about? There are endless questions and a smorgasbord of answers to every one of them.

Both the set-apart sacredness with which we tend to regard the sacraments and this huge accumulation of tradition and rules and theology can obscure for us that the sacraments are, at their heart and core, very simple and ordinary actions: eating, drinking, washing.

They touch us at the level of our most basic human needs: hunger, thirst, belonging.

They use the most basic of things – bread and water.  
Ordinary, everyday things.

Sometimes we need to be reminded of that.

When I say this, I don't mean to suggest that we shouldn't approach baptism or communion, the two sacraments we Presbyterians practice, with reverence and expectation and a sense of being in the presence of the holy. I'd never deny that it's good for us to ask lots of theological questions and think them through rigorously; it challenges us and opens up new understandings and keeps our faith from being a mass of mushy sentiment. I even think it's worthwhile to understand something of the various "rules" that have developed around the sacraments in different branches of the churches; we might not agree with them but the reasons that they came to be are worth thinking about.

But sometimes we need to return to the simplest and most basic elements of our faith to appreciate them as gifts.

I so appreciated the opportunity to read *Take This Bread* by Sara Miles, which we talked about at Faith Book Club this week, because of the way the author looks right past all that complicated theology to see communion as a simple act of giving bread and eating it. She wandered into a church, had communion, and discovered she wanted more of that bread. From that very small, ordinary beginning, a profound, challenging, engaged life of faith unfolded for her.

"... when I opened my mouth and swallowed, everything changed," she writes. "It was real." (p.61) She couldn't explain it at first. She just knew she wanted, or needed that bread. After a while, she came to see a radical hospitality in the act of communion: Jesus welcoming everyone to the table. Eventually, that understanding became a calling: feeding people was what she had to do.

But it all began with that bread, wanting that bread.

Bread.

They call it the "staff of life," the most basic of foodstuffs in nearly every culture whether it comes in the form of tortillas or a whole wheat loaf.

The word "bread" is a kind of symbolic shorthand for "food" in the bible and beyond, as in "share your bread with the hungry," which can mean your peanut butter and your milk and your vegetables too.'

"Breaking bread" means sitting down together as friends and sharing a meal and fellowship. It suggests reconciliation and the breaking down of barriers. The word "companion" comes from a word for bread.

Our "daily bread" refers to our most basic needs, all that we need to trust God for.

And water

Water is the prerequisite not just for our lives but for all life. We can't live more than a very short while without water. Bodies are 98 percent water

Water, in a way, is who we are.  
Water, in the sacrament of baptism, tells us Whose we are, too.  
It speaks of utter dependence.  
We need God like we need water.

Water to tell us who we are.  
Bread to feed us at a common table.

It's as basic as that.

But here's the really interesting thing: To step back and realize again how ordinary the "stuff" of the sacraments is, strangely enough, doesn't take anything away from the holiness. If anything, it draws us more deeply into awe. A treasure in a treasure chest or a bank vault may be fabulous but a treasure in a clay jar, now *that* amazes and intrigues us; it says there's something more to discover here.

Here.

The sacraments invite us to the intersection of the ordinary and the sacred. They are tangible and visible, but they are also signs that point to an invisible reality. They are gifts in and of themselves, but they are also gifts that enlarge our capacity to receive other gifts. They change us. They humble us. They spark gratitude in us. I think the gift of the sacraments is a little bit like a gift of something like a camera or a tool kit. It's wonderful in itself... but it's just the beginning. It makes the discovery of other gifts possible. The sacraments teach us how to see: to holiness, sacredness – the presence of God – in other ordinariness. The sacraments teach us to make the faith in our heads and our hearts visible in the world.

It might be in the glance of perfect understanding between complete strangers. It might be the caring touch of a health care provider. It might be the home-cooked meal a deacon delivers to a shut-in. It might be working together with others to solve a difficult problem. It might be a loving embrace. It might be giving up something you want to do to honor someone else's wishes. It might be in the joy of making music together. It might be the communion of watching a sunset together. It might be the baptism of a shared grief.

The presence of God is there, if we know how to see it.  
And sometimes we get to be the means of making that presence real.

The fact that the sacraments involve actions – coming forward, pouring, reaching out our hands, sharing bread, even getting it all ready – helps us connect faith words with faith actions. It does happen that sometimes we get all theoretical and theological and abstract, focused on intellectual understanding or the right beliefs or a clever mission statement ... but the Christian faith is an embodied and lived faith. Jesus himself shows us that. All the things we believe, if they are real, have to be given substance in our lives.

Sara Miles writes, "I was tasting a connection between communion and food – between my burgeoning religion and my real life. My first, questioning, year at church ended with a

question whose urgency would propel me into work I'd never imagined: Now that you've taken the bread, what are you going to *do*?" (p.97)

She couldn't stop thinking about how Jesus had said to Peter, "Do you love me?" and when Peter said, "Well, of course," Jesus told him "Feed my sheep." She knew then that she needed to feed people, too, and figure out how to extend the radical hospitality of the table.

She describes how as she started "poking around in the Bible," she found just an incredible number of references to food and feeding people, hunger and thirst. She noticed how often Jesus was eating with people and feeding people. And especially the way he talked about himself as bread, before he was killed for eating with the wrong people. "All of it," she says, "pointed to a radically inclusive love that accompanied people in the most ordinary of actions – eating, drinking, walking – and stayed with them, through fear, even past death. That love meant giving yourself away, embracing outsiders as family, emptying yourself to feed and live for others. The stories illuminated the holiness located in mortal human bodies, and the promise that people could see God by cherishing all those different bodies the way God did." (p. 91-93)

That's another ordinary-but-sometimes-overlooked thing about the sacraments: they are physical. We experience them through our bodies. Water on the skin. Bread eaten. Wine or juice tasted and swallowed. The holy and the ordinary come together ... *in us*.

We are not worthy. We don't fully understand what it all means. We are quite often not prepared. We get a lot of things wrong. Even our best efforts can be clumsy. Sometimes we resist what we hear Jesus saying to us. But nevertheless, as Paul says, the light of God's presence and glory has shone in our hearts.

We are like clay jars – breakable, flawed, ordinary. But we are containers for treasure – for the Spirit, light, grace, and love of God. Like the bread, the juice, the water, we are signs of God's presence.

The sacraments of the church lead us eventually to the conclusion that we ourselves are sacraments. Isn't this what we are saying when we use the same language Paul uses for the church? We are the body of Christ. Not just that we do the stuff Jesus asks us to do, but that we bear the presence and holiness of God in us, as we use whatever gifts we have been given, to feed people, welcome, teach, encourage, organize, advocate, give, touch, make art, fix things, lead, build, comfort. In the sacraments we experience God's gifts – God's self-giving, really. When we receive them we begin the process of learning what the sacraments want to teach us: to give of ourselves in the name of the One who gives us water, and bread, and himself.

Amen.

Resources:

*Take This Bread*, by Sara Miles