

## **ENCOUNTERING THE SPIRIT IN A MATERIAL WORLD**

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, October 8, 2017***

***Based on I Corinthians 11:23-26; Matthew 28:18-20***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Here We Stand: Sure Faith in Uncertain Times.” The series is in celebration of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the Protestant Reformation, and we have been using key ideas of the Protestant Reformation to help us to reflect about our own faith. We have seen that each main idea of the Reformation can be summarized in a short Latin phrase. The phrase for this morning is “*extra nos*”—which means, “outside of us.” Those two words capture the very heart of the Reformation, because over and over in recent weeks we have seen how the Reformers perceived that salvation must come from outside us. We will find Truth about God not by dreaming up our own ideas but by looking to what God reveals to us through the Scripture, and we can experience salvation from sin and death not because of what we do but because of what God does for us through Jesus Christ. In short, we cannot save ourselves; we must look outside of ourselves—*extra nos*—in order discover God’s saving truth and grace.

A key illustration of this principle can be found in the sacraments, and the sacraments ended up being a huge point of disagreement between Protestants and Catholics—even up to this day. This morning we will explore why, and we will see how the whole idea of the sacraments can be very helpful for living in today’s world. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

Our country was shaken this past week by the worst mass shooting in our nation’s history. In the face of horrible evil, we are at a loss for ready answers. The Psalmist put it well in a verse I sent out through a Weekly Word email this past Monday—“When the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (Psalm 11:3) The very next verse says “The Lord is in his holy temple. God’s throne in heaven abides.” (Psalm 11:4) We can look to God, and recognize that over all the turbulence of our world God yet reigns, and God is at work for good. In precisely the moment when we see the great wickedness that human beings can do, and we feel wounded and empty in our own hearts, we can find hope by looking “*extra nos*”—outside ourselves—by lifting our vision to God.

But this may be difficult for many people to do, because we live in a materialistic age, when people are conditioned to look no further than the material things around them. Even people who believe in God often feel that God is far removed from the affairs of daily life. How can we experience the spiritual—how can we have any real sense of the presence and power of God—when we are so embedded in a material world?

It is here where the sacraments can be helpful. In sacraments, God’s grace comes to us precisely through the ordinary stuff in the world around us. In the sacrament of Baptism (celebrated this morning at the 10:30 hour), God’s cleansing and life-giving power

is experienced through ordinary water. In the sacrament of Communion, which we shared last Sunday, God's grace comes to us through an ordinary piece of bread, and grape juice that came right off the shelf at the grocery store. The message is that the ordinary material things of this world can actually be vehicles through which God touches us and is at work in us.

There are two church sacraments—Baptism and Communion—although in the Catholic church there are seven; we'll come back to that in a moment. But beyond those church sacraments we can also talk about other things being "sacramental." Something in this world becomes sacramental—it takes on the character of a sacrament—whenever it is a point on this earth where we encounter in some way the presence of God.

For example, for some people gardening can be sacramental. For others, it's just plain frustrating; but for some, the act of digging in the soil and working with plants and seeing them grow is an experience of the creative hand of God. Hiking can be sacramental, when it is an experience of the beauty and wonder of God through the magnificence of God's creation around us. Gazing at a sunset can be sacramental if it opens our heart to the glory of God. Sacraments are often defined as "visible signs of the invisible grace of God." That well describes Baptism and Communion; but it is good to recognize that many things on this earth can be sacramental this sense—that they move us to see through the visible things of this earth to perceive the eternal reality of God.

The point is that living in a material world need not dull us to spiritual realities. Quite the opposite can be the case. If we have a receptivity to God, the elements of God's world can inspire us to consider and connect with the Spirit of God who is behind it all. We can be moved, along with the English poet William Blake, "To see a World in a Grain of Sand, and a Heaven in a Wild Flower, Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand, And Eternity in an hour. (William Blake, 1757-1827)

Still, all this could amount to little more than the sort of nebulous spirituality that is all too common nowadays. Full Biblical teaching about the sacraments can lead us to something more complete and solid and far deeper; and here the Reformation discussion about sacraments can be extremely helpful.

In the late Middle Ages, the Catholic church put enormous emphasis on sacraments, but Catholic teaching at that point had moved quite far from the Biblical message. The Catholic church saw the sacraments as *a way that the church dispenses God's grace*. God's grace, as we have seen in this series, is God's boundless love and mercy and blessing given to us although we have not deserved it. The Catholic church affirmed the reality of God's grace, but taught that God's grace is channeled through the church, and is received by individual church members when they receive the sacraments administered by the church leadership. So you partake of God's grace when you go to church and receive a sacrament from the priest, who is thus the mediator between you and God's grace, as we discussed last week.

On that score, the Catholic church taught that there are seven sacraments—marriage (of course, non-married people are left out of that one), ordination (if you are not an ordained minister, sorry, you missed out on that one too), extreme unction (or last rights, which you want to miss out on as long as possible—although actually last rights would include not only extreme unction but also penance and Communion; extreme unction is more properly termed the “anointing of the sick,” which can be done for any seriously ill person, although you still would rather not be a candidate). This leaves four more: Confirmation, Penance (or Confession), Baptism, and Communion. There are only two of these that you can do on a regular basis—confession and Communion—and if this is how you receive God’s grace, you had best do them often. Thus Catholics were called upon to come to regular Confession and weekly Communion as an ongoing obligation in order to receive God’s grace.

Notice how in this scenario God’s grace becomes not something that you receive by looking outside yourself to God, but something you get by means of what you do and what the priest does in all these church rituals. This can easily lead to a mechanical view of how God’s grace works—people think that the way to receive God’s blessing is to go through the motions of a church sacrament. When people think in this way, they soon begin to ask themselves, “What is the minimum that I have to do?” In the Middle Ages, this attitude came to extremes. People came to the idea that all you really needed to do to receive was to be present in the church at the moment when the priest said the words of consecration over the Communion elements, and then of course you needed to receive the Communion bread right afterwards (only the priest drank the wine, for reasons I won’t get into this morning). In the prayers leading into Communion in the Catholic church, there are bells called Sanctus bells, which the acolyte will ring, signaling that something important is happening or about to happen. Up to this point in worship in many medieval churches, there were always people who were just hanging out in the back of the church or outside if it was nice, chatting with one another. Who needs the prayers and hymns or the sermon? But they would listen for that bell, and as soon as it rang they would all rush in—for the part that counts. They thought they just needed to be in there for the moment when the priest said, in Latin, *hoc est corpus meum*—this is my body—which is the moment when the church taught that the bread mystically changed into the body of Christ. Then they would come forward to receive the bread, and would walk right out the door. They had gotten their bit of grace for the week.

Some people today think of church sacraments in a similar fashion. I get calls from time to time from people who have no connection with the church who want to get their child baptized. It becomes clear in conversation that they think of baptism as a kind of heavenly inoculation, and believe you should just get your child done by going through this little ritual. When I explain that you have to sit through a whole worship service to do this, and that you really should intend to be an active member in the church, and bring

your children to worship and Sunday School each week to learn about God and grow in faith, they quickly lose interest. They just wanted a zap of God's grace, not the whole deal.

In such thinking, the sacraments come to be seen almost as something magical. Someone says the magic words and waves the hand and something special is supposed to happen. Indeed it is believed that out of the words *hoc est corpus meum* there arose the phrase hocus pocus. It was part of the Protestant critique of this kind of magical and mechanical view of sacraments. If the sacraments become a matter of hocus pocus, we are missing something.

The Reformers cut through all this by using the first principle of the Reformation—*sola scriptura*—look to the Bible alone. From the Scriptures we get a clear picture of what the sacraments really are. First of all, the Scriptural sacraments are not designed by the church, but are given to us by Christ. We saw this in the Scripture readings we heard this morning. Jesus told his disciples to baptize; as we heard from the gospel of Matthew, Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 28:19) Jesus also instituted the sacrament of Communion, telling his disciples to keep celebrating the Lord's Supper, using the bread and the cup, as he had done at the Last Supper. [*I received from the Lord what I handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus took bread . . . I Cor. 11:23*] So the sacraments are *Christ-given*, which means that there are just two of them—Baptism and Communion—because Jesus specifically gave us those two. Both sacraments use a *tangible sign*—the water of Baptism and the Communion elements are things that you not only see but also can feel and even taste. Thus God, who created us as physical beings, uses physical elements to help us to connect with God. The sacraments also are clearly designed to happen in a fellowship of believers. You can't baptize yourself or share Communion with just yourself.

So the sacraments are *Christ-given tangible signs through which we experience God's grace together*. The center of it all, of course, is that a sacrament is an experience of God's grace; but it is not the sacrament itself that gives grace, nor is it the church hierarchy that is dispensing grace via the sacrament. It is *Christ* who meets us with grace within the sacraments. As it is said in our United Methodist statement on Communion, "Jesus Christ is the host, and we participate at Christ's invitation." (from *This Holy Mystery*) This is why, in our church, Communion is open to everyone—you do not have to be a member of the church, and you do not have to be a certain age, because Christ invites not only Methodists or people who have somehow qualified themselves; Christ invites everyone to come to the table. This also is why we baptize infants and young children, because we do not have to somehow make ourselves worthy of God's blessing. Baptism declares that God's infinite love and promise come to us as a gift—and that of course is precisely what grace is, the unearned blessing of God. Thus the sacraments make plain that we do not have to somehow achieve our own salvation; God's saving grace comes from outside of us—*extra nos*. We are invited to receive God's grace in faith.

So the sacraments, when rightly understood, bring a much needed message to our age. In a time when people so often imagine themselves to be self-reliant, the sacraments calls us to look to a Power beyond ourselves. In a time when people often think either that God is nonexistent or that God is distant, the sacraments say that God is present in the stuff of this world, and can be experienced in ordinary places. And in a time when people tend toward a privatized spirituality, the sacraments of the church say that we really need to come into spiritual community together, to experience the fullness of God's grace with one another.

A family once invited a bunch of people over for dinner. As they all prepared to sit down for the meal, the parents asked their six year old daughter to say the blessing. The girl replied, "I don't know what to say." The mother said, "Just say what you hear Mommy say." The little girl began, "O Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people for dinner."

Jesus might wonder that sometimes. The people who gather for the sacraments are flawed. But precisely here is the central point. Our ultimate well-being—our ultimate destiny—depends not on our imperfection, but on the grace of God come to us through Jesus Christ.

So as we encounter a troubled world, and troubles in our own lives, we need not lose hope; but we are invited to join with God's people and look to the Lord in faith. Then we can find real confidence, knowing that, as Jesus said, "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:20)