

“It’s about Sacraments”  
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 10:1-5  
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The table is set...most, if not all, of you know what is going to happen. We are going to celebrate one of the two required dramas in our worship: communion. Communion is a drama: a drama is reenactment of story. In this drama, your pastors get to play the role of Jesus. Let me tell you that is not type-casting and we are certainly not looking for a cross! Your role, should you choose to accept it, is to be a disciple of Jesus around the table with him. That’s the drama that we go through each time we celebrate communion: pastors play the role of Jesus...and you play the role of his followers. All of us find welcome at this table. Jesus welcomes us, has a place setting for each of us, and we accept our role in this drama as a disciple. Sometimes we just might become what we act out!

I said this is required drama, which is to say, it is sacrament. It is the mark of our being a church, a Presbyterian church, a church consistent with this two-thousand year old tradition of following Christ. This is must do...gotta-do...and we give it a special name: a sacrament.

The other required drama, of course, happens around the wooden stand on the platform, what we call the baptismal font. Today is not a day to concentrate on that baptism drama, but the visual is always here. In two words, baptism says: You belong...you belong to God. The table and font are two treasures in view each week that we gather in this place for worship. In fact, because they are here week after week, we tend to forget about them.

So, as we turn to our Scripture, we find that Paul is addressing how people who have been baptized and who have celebrated communion forget about these treasures...take them for granted. Paul draws a rather interesting parallel: baptism and communion have an Old Testament model. In the story of the Exodus from Egypt, you may recall, Moses and the people were led by cloud and led through the Red Sea. In the foggy wetness of the cloud and the waters of the Red Sea, Paul finds an analogy for baptism. Now you or I might not immediately see a connection but Paul did. In our terms, we might be bold to say that walking under the cloud was like sprinkling and walking through the Red Sea was like being “dunked,” but that is pushing it! As you also may remember, in that Exodus experience the people of Israel had holy food—manna or bread from heaven. God provided water in an arid place through springs that came from a rock. Food and drink—an analogy to communion. I did not make these analogies! But now listen to the words of Paul (1 Corinthians 10:1-5):

**10** I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea,<sup>2</sup> and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,<sup>3</sup> and all ate the same spiritual food,<sup>4</sup> and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

So, the people of Israel had similar signs of baptism and communion. But then Paul turns the table over and spills the water out of the fount. The people grew accustomed to these sacraments. They no longer paid attention to the signs: You belong. It was much more important to belong somewhere else. They ignored the sign: You are welcome. They sought welcome in other places. The result, says Paul, is that they were struck down in the wilderness...40 years of wandering before entering the Promised Land...all because they ignored the signs. How easy it is to ignore the signs right in front of us!

Several years ago, a church member and a pastor from this church were coming home late one night from Charlotte. They took a wrong turn and ended up in what we call a not-so-nice and possibly not-so-safe area of Charlotte. After winding around, they came up into a parking lot beside an office building. From the parking lot, there was access out on to Billy Graham Parkway and then a clear way to get home. It was midnight; there was no one in the parking lot; there were virtually no cars on Billy Graham Parkway. The only thing was that there was the sign that said, "No exit on to Billy Graham Parkway." It was dark; they were lost; there was no traffic; and they could see a way home. All they had to do was take this access road on to Billy Graham Parkway. Looking at the sign that said, "No exit to Billy Graham Parkway," the church member asked: "Do you think we can go out this way?" Being the sage pastor that I am...I mean that this pastor was (I am trying preserve the anonymity of the guilty party here!)...the answer was "Sure, why not?" After all, there is no one around and this would be the quickest way home.

So, pulling out on Billy Graham Parkway, these two traveled about quarter of a mile before they heard, "Buh-buh-buh-buh-buh." Of all things, now they had flat tire. So, they got out to replace the tire. As they were getting the jack and spare tire out to change the right back tire that was flat, they heard a hissing sound. The hissing sound was coming from the left front tire; no, not just the front left tire; the right front tire too. Within a couple of minutes, there were three flat tires.

You see, back there where the sign said, "No exit on to Billy Graham Parkway," there were those hazard features with sharp points that cut into your tire if you go out the wrong way." Couldn't see those in the dark...ignored the sign...and found out why the sign was there!

Here's what the apostle Paul says about sacraments: they are signs...ignore them at your peril. The signs are meant for our health, our joy, and our wholeness but we can ignore them...to our danger.

Now you may be ready for a threatening message now: it becomes the preacher's job to tell of you of the danger. You have probably heard one those threatening messages before: "You are going to burn if you don't turn!" You want to know why this is a common pattern of Christian preaching? Because it works! Threatening messages create crises. Here's what we know: crises fascinate us. Think about how after 9/11 people came to worship: we had better than Easter-like attendance. We were focused on how to become better citizens of the world so that the world could point to us gluttons for wealth, comfort, and stuff. How long did it last? Weeks, a couple of months, perhaps a year. Crises fascinate us. Maybe you are the exception, but what do you do when drive past a car accident. I slow down and "rubber neck!" Crises fascinate us.

So if we can manufacture a crisis, we will get people to look at the signs again. Here's one reason why worship is so underwhelming and not overwhelming in a Presbyterian church and in many churches: we choose not create crises. We refuse to do that. When the goal of worship is fascination, then we are always looking for the loudest noise, the gaudiest display, the shock value. But once the crisis is turned off...there is nothing more. Like bugs attracted to a light...once the light is turned off, there is no more attraction. Fascination depends on what is external to us.

True worship is about contemplation, about discovering who I am in the presence of God. Contemplation takes time, takes energy, and it takes attention. Every Sunday these two signs are here: table and fount. After a while, they blend in and we forget about them. We forget to whom we belong. We get trapped into doing things that will make us belong to our family, make us belong in the workplace; make us belong among our friends. When we forget to whom we belong; a message about financial stewardship like that brought by Jim Barnes this morning seems impossible to us. We have forgotten that we belong to God. That sign, the baptismal fount, says: You belong to God.

Then we forget that God welcomes us...that there is a place setting for us here...that there is a joy in his presence that will surpass all other promises of joy. We have become trapped by those other promises: that I will experience joy if I get this thing or this position...that I will experience joy if this person will do what I want...that I will experience joy if my church would do such and such. As the old country song puts it: "We were looking for love in all the wrong places."

The greatest joy comes in accepting that we are welcomed by God and spending time in that welcome. That takes contemplation and not simply fascination. That takes sitting up and reading the signs all over again. That takes discovery...that's time-consuming and rarely instantaneous...it takes regular attention.

Oh, that during the days to come, you and I will catch ourselves in trying to belong, trying to fit in, and remember, "Wait a minute, I belong to God." Oh, that in days to come, you and I will catch ourselves trying get joy out some situation or some other person, and we will remember, "Wait a minute, my joy is in God."

As the Apostle Paul told the church in Corinth, so I can tell you: we have the signs. You belong to God...you are welcomed by God. But they are so easy to ignore...to our own peril, to our own danger. On this World Communion Sunday, look at the signs again and contemplate what it means that you belong and that you are welcome.