

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
October 1, 2023
Spiritual practices – sacraments

We have been approaching our scriptures in recent weeks through the lens of spiritual practices – a spiritual practice being some chosen action, rhythm, or discipline that deepens your relationship with the Lord, your connection to Christ, and your calling to the world around you. A spiritual practice can help us take meaningful action that increases our cognizance, like deepening our prayer or devotional life through some achievable rhythm or being intentional about forgiveness and paying attention to our hearts. Or practices may help us take meaningful steps even when we don't have all the answers, like when it comes to reconciliation or justice. Or practices may keep us rooted in a time of change, stress, and uncertainty.

Today, on this world communion Sunday, we think about sacraments and their role in our spiritual journeys, how they deepen our relationship, and how they keep us rooted in the truths and symbols of our faith. In previous weeks, I have construed practices as actions and rhythms that we devise for ourselves or perhaps draw from age-old practices. But the sacraments are more prescribed, coming from Jesus' own directives. We don't come up with them but follow and engage them. Furthermore, the sacraments of baptism and communion provide practices for one's spiritual life as well as unifying symbols for the larger church. For, on this world communion Sunday, communion is not only a practice in our tradition but across our denominations and divides, across language and culture and ideology and geography – a common table, a common truth, common elements.

There is a certain rootedness, a groundedness in the truths and symbols of our faith, that I want to focus on today: a rootedness in the promises and presence of God.

Why do we need sacraments? While we could answer that question in a number of ways, one answer is not altogether different than why Israel needed water in our Old Testament reading. When we find them groaning and feeling abandoned in the wilderness, it had not been that long since they had seen God do miracles, experience God release them, and see the sea parted. But now they are in a place absent of any comforts, absent of any of the symbols and ways they had always known God to be present. It is a wild wilderness without resources, without symbols. God is not there, or so it seems to their eyes and feels to their hearts.

Water, for them, was not only crucial to surviving, it was often seen as a sign of God's presence and provision. So to have no water is to have no security, no relief from the heat, and no comfort that God is with them. Hence the accusation of bringing them out into the wilderness to die. So, when God gives water, it is tainted a little; it sounds like God is giving into their whining. God is giving relief, but he is also giving a sign that he can provide, that he is with them even in such dry places. He is sustaining them even while putting them back in touch with God's presence and saving power.

Water is not a sacrament, but we might think of it for ancient Israel as sacramental – meaning it fosters a sense of communion and contact with God, a physical reminder of God's presence, and the comfort of God's help. It provides a physical reminder of what they might, in better circumstances, know to be true. It brings them back into a space and a moment when they know God's deliverance again.

I chose the poem today because 1, why turn down an opportunity to bring fly fishing into worship, and 2, the poem conveys a type of sacramental moment on the water of the St. Joe River in Idaho. He borrows communion language, the language of our sacrament, but in a way that expresses the sacramental aspects of his experience in fly fishing. I call it sacramental because fly fishing the St. Joe brings him into this holy, clear space, this moment when things fall into emotional order and balance. There is a sense of peace and communion with God, contact with creation, and divine presence.

He comments on the ancient environment, as if a temple crafted by God's own hand, the rhythm of the fly rod, the community of those there together, and how it changes how he feels about the world.

If time could stop,
freeze frame
our communion,
I think I could let go

of my dreams,
of the endless lists,
of unfulfilled hopes,
of projects,
of agenda items,

even the unresolved
conflicts

of my soul.

I could leave my questions
on the table

glad.

I relate to what the poet describes. I often find a similar transportation or transformation through fly fishing. Perhaps it speaks to the need for sacramental activities, meaning not just the prescribed sacraments of the church but places and activities where you feel a certain contentment and serenity emerge, a reconnecting with God's presence, and a rebalancing of our heart's priorities.

Such an emotional and spiritual experience is what we hope for in the sacraments also – a sense of contact and communion with God, with Christ, with God's grace, with creation purposes. It is what we would hope for as we seek to connect with God's presence and partake of the foundational symbols of our faith, re-orienting for us what is essential and finding contentment in Christ.

In our tradition, as with many other denominations, we affirm only two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's table, the primary criterion being those things directed or commanded by Jesus himself. For, Jesus instructs his followers both to be baptized and partake of the table in remembrance of him. These become the foundational practices of the early church.

Therefore, we participate in part of the discipline of discipleship, doing the things Jesus instructs us to do. But more so because these are how we confirm and affirm the truths of Christ's work and its effect on us. Because these are the ways that we reconnect and commune with God amid great uncertainty.

In baptism, we could say many things – but baptism represents our submitting ourselves to Christ's work in our lives. It signifies a right of entry, that we are fully part of Christ's community. It symbolizes a death to the past and our earthly impulses and a rising to what Christ can and desires to do in us. It symbolizes resurrection life, transformation, a new identity, or discipleship. It is a sacrament we participate in once, yet we continually live it out, realizing it in new ways. It is why every time someone joins the church or is ordained to serve in the office of elder or deacon, we are enjoined to remember our baptism, to grow into those promises, the promises of God, and the promises of the baptized.

And in communion, unlike baptism, we are called to participate innumerable times, for whenever we break the bread and drink of the cup, we do so in remembrance of him. We commune once again; we invoke that moment of connection with Christ's broken body and poured out blood – we claim the promises once again for ourselves. Like Israel wandering in the wilderness, we need those periodic reconnections to recreate Christ's redemptive work and power, lest we forget it, lest we start to complain thinking God has forgotten us, lest we go on living and worrying and reacting like those who have not been redeemed.

To think of the sacraments as a spiritual practice is to consider how these sanctioned practices, baptism, and the Lord's table, keep us in touch with the central truths and symbols of our faith, how these put us into communion with the Lord, how they invite us to submit ourselves to the truths and to the path of discipleship they represent. Because if we were able to rediscover God's grace in them and find our own identity in and through these symbols, I wonder if we wouldn't feel a similar effect that the poet conveys.

If time could stop,
freeze frame
our communion,
I think I could let go

of my dreams,
of the endless lists,
of unfulfilled hopes,
of projects,
of agenda items,

even the unresolved
conflicts
of my soul.

I could leave my questions
on the table

glad.

That is what we are after, for our lives to take on a baptismal contour, dying to self and being raised to Christ, of turning in repentance towards the God of grace. This is what we are after, to let all our angst and unsettledness go so that we might find ourselves and come to see ourselves through the sacrifice and love of Christ.

Now, I am trying to speak both to the richness of symbol and truth embodied in these sacraments, but I'm also speaking to some kind of ideal encounter around the sacraments which may or may not be true much of the time. I mean, despite all I have said about the sacramental and the things that put us in these holy moments and places, despite the fact that the table is to be one of those places, we may not feel it every time. Every person's baptismal moment may not have had, like Jesus did, a dove falling out of heaven and a voice audibly speaking. But the truth stands nonetheless.

You see, another thing the sacraments do is to speak to a truth that remains true no matter how your day is going. The sacrament proclaims something. Like a marriage ceremony, it cements a relationship, and that relationship formally holds until some other ceremony undoes it. It. The point is that despite our highest aspirations of being in touch with the Lord, feeling the Spirit, and having the sense of the holy all the time, we may not. But our baptism reminds us that we are Christ's. The table reminds us of things that are true, whether we feel them today or not. They counterbalance our emotions, performance, and our ups and downs, continuous symbols and practices of what is true.

By affirming and remembering our baptisms, by partaking of the Lord's table, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes, we proclaim one church spanning all our differences, united around the grace of God that comes to greatest expression through Christ. We affirm the truths and the calling embodied in these symbols, and we acknowledge that in order to find our identity and serenity more fully in Christ and in God's grace, we must regularly partake. And while the font and table proclaim what is true for us whether we feel it that day or not, we do seek grow deeper into their truths every time we come, so that we might grow more fully into the image of Christ.

And all God's people said...

Water from the Rock

(Num 20:1–13)

17 From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?” ³ But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” ⁴ So Moses cried out to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” ⁵ The LORD said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”

Matthew 26:26-30

²⁶ While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” ²⁷ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; ²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹ I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

³⁰ When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

I Corinthians 11: 23-25

The Institution of the Lord’s Supper

(Mt 26:26–29; Mk 14:22–25; Lk 22:14–23)

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁵ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of

me.”²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Poem: “Fly Fishing on the St. Joe”

All this,
cut by water
since time immemorial—
clear, turquoise, deep—
cliffs steep,
stooped;
moss and leaning
green.

You and me,
lines curled out,
behind, and
out again;
rhythmic and
soft
landing
of
fly;
rocks piled like
loaves of bread;
this water,
like wine.

If time could stop,
freeze frame
our communion,
I think I could let go

of my dreams,
of the endless lists,
of unfulfilled hopes,
of projects,
of agenda items,

even the unresolved

conflicts
of my soul.

I could leave my questions
on the table

glad.