

Bread and Water

Bread and water are the fundamental basics of our survival, and because of this they make exceptional metaphors for our relationship with God. To really see it for all its depth requires a certain amount of spiritual growth, which is why we have our sacraments rooted in these physical realities. The physical part of the sacraments can be seen and apprehended by a child, we baptize infants and we welcome little ones to the table with a rudimentary understanding of what is going on. In doing this we recognize that the Spirit is at work in our lives and that when we participate in these rituals we trust that Spirit to bring to us the growth that is required for a deeper understanding. To take these symbols too literally is actually to rob them of their meaning to some extent. Consider the water of baptism, in the early centuries of the Christian faith, as baptism moved from being a spontaneous act (ala the Ethiopian Eunuch who met Philip) to being a formal sacrament done within the context of a church community, there were those who held to the very literal connection with the Hebrew purification rituals: it was about getting washed clean of your sin. Some saints of the church actually delayed being baptized until they were old and felt they had all their "sinning" out of the way, some even going so far as to try and be baptized as close to their death as possible, so as to limit the time they had to "fall back into sin."

The Church recognized that this was putting us on the road to idolatry and possibly even sorcery, making this symbolic act more a magical rite that conveyed sanctification in a very transactional sense. In time we steered away from that idea and came to the point where we would baptize babies, as a part of the covenant process, God's grace was the operative thing, not our will power, and so we were free to bring innocent children and place the seal of the community of grace upon them. It is not about purity, it is about dying and rising. It is, in a very direct and clear way, the precise change that Jesus was trying to bring about in the world: to take the love of God out of the hands of the legalists and the power mongers and put it in the hands of the "little ones," whether they be new people or new believers. Baptism is not the culmination of a faith journey, it is the beginning of one, we should always remember to treat it that way. Water is the symbol, the foundation of life as we know it. Water is far more basic to our survival than bread. Without water we would perish in days, we can go a fairly long time without bread.

Yet in our sacramental understanding, the bread comes more often than the water. The water of baptism is a once, for all observance. You do not need to be re-baptized, because God's grace doesn't stop working on you, it doesn't need refreshed. To use the words that the reformed traditions hold, baptism is an outward sign of "justification," or salvation, it is a way we remember that God is our Creator. Water is quite literally the most abundant constituent of our body, but bread is more complicated. Our sacramental relationship with bread must be a regular practice, thus we have the "remembrance" of the table. Where we eat bread and drink wine, and we remember the physical substance of Christ. As we repeat this gathering throughout our lives, we grow in our faith, we learn more we understand more, we enter more deeply into the communion of this table and we are sanctified.

While we all must start with the things we see and touch and taste, it is important to get beyond the mere material understanding of these things. That's what the Gospel lesson for today is saying. People have come following Jesus because of the miracle, where they were fed and satisfied, but here Jesus challenges them to see something more than that. This is, in essence, what the church is always about, we provide for people's needs in some way, whether that is literally giving them bread, whether that is

providing a community where they get the relationships that we all need, even if we just pique their curiosity, all of those things are just the surface, the substance of what we are is rooted in the bread of heaven, and if we fail to make that our center and focus we fail altogether.

Honestly, we do fail at this all too often. Because we don't really know what to do beyond the things we call "real." We know how to collect food and distribute it to the needy, we know how to do things together, we're particularly good at fellowship around these parts, but we, and every church really, can get pretty stuck on just doing the things that we do, and neglecting why we do them. On a Sunday like today where we participate in both of the sacraments, you have a chance to look beyond the material things and see what Jesus is really. Take some time to consider the bread and the water, the living water and the bread of heaven. The physical things that we use in these sacraments point us to a deeper reality, they remind us, because we are prone to forget, that God is with us and has taken real steps to make sure that we can also be with God.

Sacraments are intersectional moments where a spiritual reality and a physical reality come together. They give us a time to recognize that God is not far off and removed from us, but that the kingdom of heaven has drawn near to us. The water is more than just H₂O and the bread is more than just a morsel to nibble. These are the elements of our lives, and God is involved in them. The goal is to one day enter a reality where these moments of togetherness don't just happen once in a while, or once a month or even once a day, but become a present reality all the time.