

Sermon: April 30, 2023. Isaiah 43: 1-3a and Acts 2: 42-47
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church in Banff – Rev Greg Wooley

For those visiting today, something you need to know about my household is that my spouse, Shannon, is also an Ordained United Church Minister, and while that sometimes leads to a lot of shop talk, there are times that we have resources to share and that is extremely helpful. A couple of weeks ago I mentioned to Shannon that it's been a long time since I'd presided at a Sunday service that includes both of our sacraments - baptism and communion - to which she said, "I just did that a couple of months ago, would you like me to share that stuff with you?" My answer was a great big YES, and that sharing was a huge help in structuring both the service and this message. So, here's my shout-out to Shannon for some structure and *more than a few* lifted sentences this morning.

The United Church's Song of Faith (2006) is a powerful, poetic expression of our beliefs in this time and place. I want to share parts of The Song of Faith and how it expresses for us what these two sacraments, baptism and communion, are for us, and I invite you to let the lyrical flow of these words speak not only to the mind, but to the heart and the soul:

"In grateful response to God's abundant love... the church receives, consecrates, and shares visible signs of the grace of God.

In company with the churches of the Reformed and Methodist traditions,
 we celebrate two sacraments as gifts of Christ:
 baptism and holy communion.

In these sacraments the ordinary things of life —water, bread, wine—
 point beyond themselves to God and God's love,
 teaching us to be alert to the sacred in the midst of life.

"Before conscious thought or action on our part,
 we are born into the brokenness of this world.

Before conscious thought or action on our part,
 we are surrounded by God's redeeming love.

Baptism by water in the name of the Holy Trinity
 is the means by which we are received, at any age,
 into the covenanted community of the church.
 It is the ritual that signifies our rebirth in faith
 and cleansing by the power of God.

Baptism signifies the nurturing, sustaining,
 and transforming power of God's love
 and our grateful response to that grace.

"...We welcome all in the name of Christ. Invited to the table where none shall go hungry, we gather as Christ's guests and friends.

In holy communion we are commissioned to feed as we have been fed,
 forgive as we have been forgiven, love as we have been loved.

The open table speaks of the shining promise of barriers broken and creation healed.
 In the communion meal, wine poured out and bread broken,
 we remember Jesus.

We remember not only the promise but also the price that he paid
 for who he was, for what he did and said, and for the world's brokenness.

 We taste the mystery of God's great love for us, and are renewed in faith and hope".

“Visible signs of the grace of God”. That’s what these sacraments are. In baptism, we hear water being poured symbolizing rebirth, we see in the imposition of water “our grateful response to God’s grace”. In communion, we recall the very dining table of Jesus and his broad sense of welcome, and, in the words of the Song of Faith, “are commissioned to feed as we have been fed, forgive as we have been forgiven, love as we have been loved.” Neither of these sacraments is about earning something, neither of these sacraments speaks of a God of conditional love, love that could or would be withdrawn or withheld. Both of these sacraments are expressions of grace, what US Pastor and racial reconciliation activist Antwuan Malone describes as “the freeing element of God’s love...[grace is] the width, and depth, and breadth of love reaching out, rippling across the ponds of time to reach into the hearts of the lost and searching... [grace is] the complete character of God on full display, in all its justice and mercy.” In both baptism and communion, God’s grace gets enacted in a physical way and we affirm the power of a God who affirms, a God who is all-in in relationship to the health of this planet and all who dwell therein, a God intimately concerned with the deepest places of your life and my life and our gathered life as a community.

That word – affirming – is a key one. It’s not “approval” to be given or denied, nor is it just some mild form of “support”; it’s the power that the writer of Isaiah 43 was getting at, the sense that God is going to remain steadfast and present no matter what happens in life: when you’re overwhelmed by the storms, when things are heating up in uncomfortable or even dangerous ways, God is your guide, your guard, your saviour. In baptism, in particular, we open ourselves to the affirmation of a loving God who says, “you are mine” and when we feel affirmed, we can function freely within a community of affirmation, a gathering of people who have heard God call their name, too.

God’s affirmation is spoken before we could possibly earn it, before we do anything to cause it to happen. Affirmation grounded in grace becomes the cornerstone of discipleship—living our lives as followers of Jesus. And the affirmation of God, which we feel so strongly in Christ, reminds us that we are to affirm that we are all God’s children, regardless of age, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, socio-economic status, or any other label we humans think of as a reason either not to engage, or to exclude others from engaging. God sees into our hearts in the way that a parent sees into the heart of their child, reveling in our uniqueness and our potentials and simply delighting in our existence.

Which brings us to the second sacrament, Communion. Communion is a powerful reminder of our togetherness. As disciples gathered around the table of Jesus, we tell each other our family story - over and over again. It is important for families to eat together. Meals bond us together and meals turn strangers into friends - and they turn friends into family. The sacrament of Communion is a symbolic meal where this group of Jesus’ followers gathers and remembers the story of who we are and God’s abundant grace. And in communion, that remembering takes us right back to that meal Jesus shared with his closest friends just before his trial and crucifixion – it reminds us of his commitment to a world where all people have what they needed, each life has dignity, every part of creation is respected and honoured and treated as precious, and it reminds us that sometimes we will be called to do uncomfortable, even precarious things to make sure that his ministry of love and inclusion and forgiveness and reconciliation rises above the divisiveness and judgmentalism that are so prevalent in our day. And as the book of Acts reminds us, this “looking out for one another” goes right back

to the earliest, first-century Churches, when the wealthier Churches sent funds to the impoverished Church in Jerusalem to acknowledge with their actions something that Jesus taught them: in our bonds of brave, practical love, we are one.

In the words of our Song of Faith, “Baptism signifies the nurturing, sustaining, and transforming power of God’s love and our grateful response to that grace.... In holy communion we are commissioned to feed as we have been fed, forgive as we have been forgiven, love as we have been loved.” May we be shaped by these gracious gifts of God, to be communities where this sustenance and forgiveness and transformation are known, by all who come through these doors and by the world beyond these doors. In Christ we pray, Amen.

References cited:

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