

“Sacramental Living”

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church by Catherine Somerville on June 28, 2015,

The readings used were Galatians 3:25-28 and 2 Corinthians 8:7-9 and verse 12.

There is something about witnessing a sacrament like baptism that makes you pay a little more attention to the call of God in your life. Baptism speaks of holy love, offered without condition, and a relationship so sacred that we understand, and yet somehow it feels that it is just a bit beyond our understanding. It is a time of decision making, of saying yes to God’s call in our living. But it is also about knowing that we are being offered a new way of life, by the one who loves us first, and we are welcomed home to this family called church. It is about receiving the new name of Christian as our very own,

When I went to school, the definition of sacrament that we learned was “a visible sign of an invisible grace”. That definition speaks about a public action, first of all, stating what we believe before a gathered community, and then receiving a water cross drawn on your head, in the presence of that community, which together with the profession of faith, proclaims to the world a personal belief, the invisible grace part if you will, the gift of God’s new life bestowed in the name of Jesus. The baptised are called to share joy with the world. That is also why we baptise, to equip and remind ourselves and others that our job is to be disciples, the hands and feet of God in the world, and that we will support one another as we go about making the kingdom of God real.

In the readings Bob shared, Paul talks about the meaning of baptism. He was writing to small, fledging communities, not mega-churches, and the people in his audience were newcomers to the faith. They came with questions but they also saw something in this community that was drawing them in. To the small church at Galatia, Paul reminded them of their unity in Christ, through their baptism faith. It is just like putting on brand new clothes, Paul said. There are no differences between you because we are all clothed in Christ, and even though the world will try and tell you about all the differences that exist between people, remember that we are one body.

In the other piece, Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth, he tells them that this call makes them extraordinary. They are going to soar. Their faith will be seen in the world through the words they use, through the wisdom they share, through their eagerness to love, and in their generous ways of living. They will not be seen as a grudging people. They will be known for their generous and extravagant living.

Joyfully, we have just witnessed all that truth right in front of our eyes, coming through a request made by a beautiful child, when she told her mother and her grandmother that she wanted to be baptised.

Recently, I was reading an article about summer living, and the author helped me reframe the definition of sacrament that I have held for close to thirty years now. She was pushing the boundaries of that definition, by saying that the very act of living is sacramental. Even small, ordinary actions, she said, like sitting under a tree, playing at the beach, watching little kids catch fireflies, or eating watermelon, can be seen as sacraments if they lead us into a space where we feel the blessing of God over our living.

When your definition of sacrament expands that way, so that your entire life is lived through that lens, then you begin to consider all the times when God felt very close: the birth of a child, beauty that took your breath away, a radical act of giving, even the pain of being hurt, because after, came the healing of forgiveness, and the blessing of relationships. You live with a heightened awareness that the divine is not so much wrapped in single actions where you stand before others and get a certificate telling the world this happened, but rather that God is there in the midst of it all.

Thomas Merton, a twentieth century Trappist monk, summed all that up in such a lovely way:

Life is that simple. We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time. This is not just a fable or a nice story. It is true. If we abandon ourselves to God, and forget ourselves, we see it sometimes, and we see it maybe frequently. We see glimpses of God everywhere, in everything, in people and in things and in nature and in events. It becomes very obvious that God is everywhere and in everything and we cannot be without God. It's impossible. The only thing is.... that we don't see it."

But occasionally, we do see it. When we come to the place where we see our lives as sacrament, then I cannot help but think that we live more intensely, not wanting to hold anything back. We live from the heart, from a place of gratitude, blessing, and thankfulness.

Just a couple of weeks ago, in the middle of June, a 21 year old man attended a Bible Study at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. For an hour, he met with nine other members of that congregation, as they studied and prayed. He came among them as a stranger, and he was welcomed. After an hour, he took out a gun and shot them. The world was outraged. People cried for retaliation and justice. They questioned why such senseless violence could happen in a house of prayer. There has been so much talk... Instead, the church leaders spoke different words. They spoke about forgiveness as they made the intentional choice to continue to see their church as a place of change where God is working on the hearts and minds and spirits of all people, not just black people, but all people. Sacramental living is about realizing that forgiving is more radical than holding onto the anger. Sacramental living is about allowing God to make new. It is about choosing to move forward rather than look back.

In September, 2006, Larissa Whitely and Ian Murphy, both 21, became engaged. They set a wedding date for the next spring. They had just finished school and were starting their careers. They were busy making plans for a long life together. A week into his new job, Ian was driving to work and was involved in a terrible car accident that left him severely brain injured. For days, no one knew if he would live.

Ian survived, but he couldn't walk or talk or eat on his own. He could not bathe or get dressed. Larissa thought at the time, "How could this possibly be what the rest of our life looks like?" Everyone would have understood if she had decided she couldn't sign up for this new reality, but that wasn't the choice she made. She decided that she didn't want to live her life without Ian. "I'd much rather stay together knowing it's going to be really difficult, than be apart."

Four years after the accident, Ian and Larissa were married. She recalls: "I remember the morning of our wedding, having breakfast with my parents, and it hit me: I am disabled now too. Every decision from this day on is going to be

routed through the consequence of Ian being disabled, and I'm taking that on. It felt so beautiful, because I didn't want Ian to live alone in that, and I didn't want to live alone, and knowing we were sharing this challenge was incredible."

Five years of marriage has required more patience than she ever knew she had. Just helping Ian button his shirt can sometimes take five minutes. But she has learned that she only has to get through one day at a time, and because of that knowledge, things are much more manageable. She has also learned that all of us are struggling, and we are probably doing a much better job than we think we are. Ultimately, she says, "We choose love. I love Ian so much more than I did before we married." Larissa Whitely Murphy would say that sacramental living is about grit, and realizing that sometimes life is meant to be rich rather than easy.

I have known life as sacrament when I have walked in large cathedrals in Europe, and in small gardens here at home. I have known life as sacrament when drinking tea and having conversation about deep, important things, and simple ordinary mercies. I have known life as sacrament when I have sat by a bed as someone breathes their last breath. I have known sacrament when I have looked in the eyes of my beloved, and when I have seen others look with love's eyes. I have known life as sacrament when I have asked for forgiveness, and when I have chosen to forgive. I feel life as sacrament whenever I say the Lord's Prayer with others. I listen to your voices as you say the words, and I realize what glory there is in being part of this body called church.

Sacramental living is about seeing- the person in front of our face, the landscape stretching out before us, the opening that might just be an invitation to new life.

#563, VU, Jesus, You have Come to the Lakeshore (a song about finding God in the ordinary and blessed moments of living.)