

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Second Sunday of Easter • April 28, 2019

Acts 5:27-32 • Psalm 118:14-29 • Revelation 1:4-8 • John 20:19-31

Every week, New York Times columnist David Brooks writes two columns. Without fail, one of them will make me think that David Brooks is a sharp commentator who has some good ideas. The other one will make me wonder who on earth gave David Brooks a column in the first place.

Thankfully, the column from this past Monday, “There Should Be More Rituals!” was pretty insightful. Reflecting on the decline of personal and communal rituals in recent decades, Brooks writes, “We’ve become pretty casual over the years. We’ve become reasonably present-oriented. As a result, we’ve shed old rituals without coming up with new ones. We’ve unwittingly robbed ourselves of a social architecture that marks and defines life’s phases.”¹

It’s interesting to take Brooks’ argument about our culture’s use of rituals and think about it in terms of church life. We have two foundational rituals that we do in church. We call them sacraments: baptism and Eucharist. It’s funny that while our culture has shed certain rituals for being too old-fashioned or burdened with baggage, our churches have actually made the sacraments even more prominent in our life together. In the 1980’s, most Lutheran churches did not celebrate the Eucharist every week. Now it’s unusual not to have weekly communion. The Thanksgiving for Baptism rite from the *ELW* that we use occasionally is another example of this kind of re-centering of the sacraments. Over the past twenty years or so, the font has become bigger, both literally and figuratively, in our churches. Almost everything we do here in our worship is informed by and pointing to the sacraments. The font brings us into the church to hear the words that lead us to the table that sends us into the world where God’s work continues to get done.

And yet, it wouldn’t be terribly difficult not to have sacraments at all. Many churches do just that. Just have worship with prayers and readings and preaching and announcements. Make up something new every week. Put the takeaways on a PowerPoint and sit back and watch for an hour. Receiving the sacraments doesn’t actually make God love you more or change your relationship with God in some objective way, it’s not like people who aren’t baptized are headed for eternal damnation or people who don’t receive communion are loved less by God, so why not just get rid of the sacraments entirely?

One answer is to say, “Well, Jesus told us to baptize people, and Jesus told us to celebrate the Eucharist, so that’s why we do them.” That answer is exactly right. And it is entirely unsatisfying. Why does Jesus tell us to do them in the first place? If church is about spirituality, why do we have these rituals which involve tangible things? Why does the church need sacraments?

If the idea of church without sacraments makes sense to you, then you, like me, have it the wrong way around. Christianity, as it evolved in the years after Christ’s death and resurrection, evolved as a meal fellowship. Before there were creeds, before there were denominations, before such a thing as Christianity with a capital C even existed, there was the meal. Words that we so often use in church like “ministry” and “minister” evolved from this meal fellowship.² To be a minister was to be a server. Someone who set out the food for the assembly. who made its invitation evident, and who served its abundance with those in need. So the church is not a group of people with identical beliefs or similar religious experiences or the same doctrinal commitments but a meeting of people around a meal. The ritual is the primary thing.

¹ David Brooks, “There Should Be More Rituals!” *New York Times*, April 22, 2019.

² Gordon Lathrop, “On the Table-Servers: Ministry in the Assembly,” Valparaiso University Liturgical Institute 2005, https://www.valpo.edu/institute-of-liturgical-studies/files/2016/09/05_lathrop.pdf.

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But hopefully you can see a kind of tension here. Baptism and communion may be rituals, but they're not just rituals like singing the national anthem before a baseball game or setting off fireworks on the Fourth of July. They're sacraments. They're a step beyond mere ritual. Sacraments are what occurs when God uses particular things, tangible items, physical reality, to increase in us the gifts of faith. Today's gospel story about Thomas and Jesus is, at its heart, a story about the sacraments. When Thomas says that he wants to come to faith in the resurrection, Jesus doesn't say, "Here's some logical proof about why it happened." Jesus doesn't say, "Just believe it harder." Jesus doesn't point to an empty tomb and say, "Put two and two together." No, Jesus says, "Reach out and touch my side." We come to faith not by thinking about God or reflecting on God or meditating on God, but by holding the body of Christ. So the Eucharist is Jesus's way, God's way, of showing up to bring us to faith in God's promises. Whenever we say we want to come to faith, Jesus says, "This is my body given for you."

Exactly how Jesus shows up in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, has been a source of some controversy among Christians over the past five hundred years. And I don't want to get bogged down in those arguments right now, but I do want to take you into the weeds on how the Eucharist actually change us.

When we talk about the sacraments, part of what we have to remember is that God is not an item in the universe alongside other items. God does not occupy space the same way you or I do.³ In other words, God is not in competition with us, sort of barging into the universe by jostling us out of the way.

If that idea feels hard to understand, think about Jesus. Jesus is both divine and human. Jesus is not half God and half human. Or forty percent and sixty percent. Or ninety-nine percent and one percent. He's fully God and fully human. And those two things are not in competition with each other, as if Jesus can only be divine at the expense of his humanity.

So let's take it one step further and think about the Eucharist. In the Lutheran tradition, we believe that when we celebrate communion, the elements become the "true body and blood" of Jesus because of the word of promise that comes with them. Obviously the word "true" is doing a lot of work in that sentence, but the basic idea is this. First, the Eucharist is not just a symbol that points us to something else. Second, more important for us, what happens when we celebrate the Eucharist is not that the bread turns into Jesus's body while still looking like bread on the outside. To use the language we used earlier, it's not fifty percent bread and fifty percent Jesus. To use our confessional language, Christ is "in, with, and under" the bread. To put it in more poetic terms, when the bread becomes the body of Christ, it doesn't become any less than what it already is.

That last line is very important. Because it means that creation, things, people, the world we live in, can communicate the grace of God without becoming any less of what they already are. Not only does the bread not become any less bread when it conveys the grace of God. You don't have to become any less you to manifest the grace of God. In fact, when the Holy Spirit moves in you to proclaim the good news and transforms you into a conduit of God's mercy, you don't become less of yourself. You become even more of who you are.

The Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann got at this idea when we wrote that the liturgy of the Eucharist was the "journey of the church into the dimension of the kingdom [of

³ As Austin Farrar put it, "In some true sense the creature and the Creator are both enacting the creature's life, though in different ways and in different depths." See Robert MacSwain, ed., *Scripture, Metaphysics, and Poetry: Austin Farrar's the Glass of Vision with Critical Commentary*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 35.

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God].”⁴ The *dimension* of the kingdom of God. Not a word we use often to describe the kingdom of God, but one that captures something quite profound about the Eucharist. It’s not an escape from the world. It’s not just a symbol that points you to another thing which is more important. It’s not just a metaphor. It’s a dimension that brings out the fullness of what is always there but wasn’t always evident.

This way of thinking about the sacraments in general and the Eucharist in particular opens up the world in an interesting way. Because instead of saying, “This is the place where God shows up,” we can ask, “If God shows up here in ordinary bread and wine, then where else might God be showing up?” The Eucharist is not a container God shows up on demand whenever someone with magic fingers says the magic words but an event in which the world is opened up to the fullness of God’s presence for the sake of the community gathered around this meal. Sacraments are not a kind of magic trick where something becomes something else. They are an event in which we and all of creation becomes the truest version of itself.

So when we think about what the sacraments give us, of course we should be thinking about grace and forgiveness and mercy and all those nice churchy words. But the Eucharist in particular should also give us a sense of curiosity about the world we live in. Because Christ shows up at this table, we always expect to be enriched and surprised at all the tables we find ourselves at. Because God’s action doesn’t require us to be less ourselves, we always expect to find something new about ourselves when we encounter one another. And because we enter the dimension of the kingdom of God whenever we gather around this table, we can always expect something new to break through in the world.

A new dimension. A new confidence. And a new life.

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⁴ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004), 26.