

ASH WEDNESDAY | FEBRUARY 17, 2021

JOEL 2:1-2, 12-17 | PSALM 51:1-17 | 2 CORINTHIANS 5:20B-6:10 | MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21

For Lent this year, I'm going to use the homilies to create some space for us to reflect on communion. And so I want to start today with a little thought experiment. Imagine for a second that you were talking to someone who, for some reason, had no concept of Christianity. And imagine that you were tasked with making Christian teaching and praxis comprehensible to them.

My guess is that you would start telling them about God. God is the source of our lives, the ground of our being, and the goal of all creation. Two thousand years ago that same activity was poured out in the human life of Jesus of Nazareth who lived in complete communion with God. And there is also this thing called the Holy Spirit which is also God, but things get a little complicated here, so don't worry about it.

Or maybe you would talk about history. You would talk about Constantine giving the church a place of privilege or the ecumenical councils that nailed down doctrine or the Reformation that sparked our current expression of church or the Great Awakening that explains so much of contemporary American life.

What you probably wouldn't do is start with the sacraments. But why not? After all, the sacraments are, by definition, instituted by Jesus.¹ So they must tell us something about who God is and how God works. That probably seems like a backwards idea, you need to understand God to understand the sacraments, but what if we did it the other way around? We used the sacraments to teach us about God?

We're going to begin try that tonight with the book of Joel. Joel is a prophetic book, so it's in that Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos tradition. But it's less concerned with justice and politics and poverty and more concerned with cultic practices. This makes it less exciting than Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos, but it makes it a good starting place to think about our own liturgical life.

The vast majority of the reading we heard today is the prophet's invitation for the people to return to their covenant with God. Something bad has happened, so now the people are going to recommit themselves to fasting, prayer, and repentance. *Rend your hearts and not your clothing*, the prophet says. *Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.* This is pretty straight forward prophetic writing so far. The people ask God not to punish them for their unfaithfulness. The prophet gives them language to do that.

But the most interesting part of this comes at the very end of today's reading. There's a little rubric that gets added in here. A rubric is a piece of instruction given to liturgical leaders. If you open one of our hymnals and look at one of the mass settings, you'll see that it has prayers and language, but it also has a bunch of rubrics in it. Rubrics just tell the people who are presiding over worship what they are supposed to do. Go here. Do that. Don't do that.

Here's Joel's rubric. *Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep.* So the presiding minister should go out and cry in front of everyone for God's mercy. And here's the interesting part. The priest is supposed to say, *"Spare your people, O LORD, and do not make your heritage a mockery, a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"* That's pretty interesting. Why should God be faithful to the covenant? Not just because it's going to

¹ In the Lutheran tradition, sacraments are 1) promises of God that involve 2) a tangible object and 3) are instituted by Jesus. Confession and forgiveness isn't a sacrament because it doesn't have #2. Receiving ashes on Ash Wednesday is just #2. Commendation of the dying has #1 and #2 but not #3. You get the idea.

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make life better for the Israelites, but because if God abandons these people, the nations will say, “Where is their God?”

So you get a second, rather unorthodox, justification for the covenant here. Not only is the covenant going to be good for the people who won’t have to suffer through more plagues of locusts, but it’s going to be good for God as well. Because if God abandons this community of people, who’s going to believe God about anything else? The people of God who are formed by God’s promises make God credible. They make it possible for other people to grow in faith and hope and love.

So hopefully you can see the connection here with how we think about the sacraments. The way we celebrate the sacraments should communicate something intelligible about God. Even if you don’t understand the language of the creed or the names of the scriptures, you should be able to look at a celebration of the Eucharist and glean something about our belief in God.

Let’s take an example. One of my mentors described growing up in the post-World War II Lutheran church this way. “A railing fenced us away from the altar, reinforcing the notion that the area between the rail and altar was holy ground... The head usher always closed and locked the pastor inside the gate. The Pastor alone was privileged to go inside the altar rail. When it came to communicating with God, he did all the talking, so he was seen as our go-between... Communion was rare and daunting! You had to be confirmed to receive. Everyone was serious. No one ever smiled. No one ever touched another.”²

You can unpack that line by line. A strong belief in the holiness of the meal. A default to clerical authority and hierarchy. Communion as something that you achieve by your own merits. The altar rail as a barrier to keep people out. But the most telling line here, the one that would probably confuse someone seeing communion for the first time, is that no one ever smiled. The locking altar rail and the altar against the wall are peculiar, but the fact that no one ever smiled is just kind of sad. It would be easy to imagine someone seeing this sacrament for the first time scratching their head and wondering, “Isn’t Jesus supposed to be here? Where is their God?”

The point here isn’t that you need to have a huge grin on your face whenever you come up for communion. It’s really just to say that for the sacraments to have any integrity in our public life, we need to act as if the things we say about them are actually true. That if Jesus is present in the sacrament, our celebrations should be marked by a sense of reverence and respect, sure, but also joy.

Does that mean you always have to be happy when you receive communion? No. But it means that we should always be thinking about whether our music, our architecture, our practices, and our words convey what we believe to be true.

As we go through the rest of this Lent, I invite you to keep Joel’s question in the front of your mind. “Where is their God?” How does what we say, how we sing, and how we eat communicate about God? How does our life together communicate the truth we confess? That we point to ordinary bread and wine, to words of promise and covenant, to people who are sinners and saint, and say, “Here is our God.”

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

² Amandus Derr, “Called, Gathered, and Enlightened,” Association of Lutheran Church Musicians, June 30 – July 2, 2008. <https://www.alcm.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/DerrPlenary-Region12008conference.doc>