

# **FEEL THE SWEEP OF IT**

**A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on World Communion Sunday, October 5, 2014**

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen*

## **Communion Divides Us but Means to Heal Divisions**

World Communion Sunday is an important Sunday in that everybody knows the degree to which churches are split and splintered. There are major divisions between Protestants and Catholics and Orthodox, but even within each of those divisions there are countless subdivisions ad nauseum. I say ad nauseum because it's enough to make you sick. Yet this is a day when an effort is made to show unity, to try to be together.

Ironically enough, communion has done more to separate people than to bring them together because so many think their church celebrates it the right way, and therefore a different way must be wrong. Furthermore, if you do it the wrong way, you can't celebrate communion with us, they say. But the purpose of this meal is communion, which at root means to be together, to enjoy one another's company, to break bread together, to heal the divisions and separations.

## **Some of My Communion Experiences:**

### **How to Drink Dust**

My first church had some gorgeous silver settings that had not been used in years and years. I was their brand-new minister, just in from seminary, and I see this silver sitting in one of their cabinets, so I said innocently, "How come you don't use this for communion?" An elderly parishioner replied, "Well, I don't know. We haven't used it in a long time." "Well, hey," I burst out, "How about let's use it." And they did, but without bothering to clean it up, so for my first communion at that church, there was dust all over this beautiful service, including a layer of dust floating on top of the wine in the chalice. Okay, I thought as I put the chalice up to my lips. It wasn't appetizing, but I suffered through and drank only a smidgen of wine that day.

### **Red Kool-Aid Subs for Wine**

The same church, by the way, liked to use both red wine and white grape juice for communion. One Sunday they ran out of wine, having filled the little individual cups a bit too much. No wine was left over for the chalice, but the servers had a grand time putting red Kool-Aid in the chalice and watching for my reaction when I drank it. They were not disappointed. They had a good laugh at my expense.

### **It's Just a Candle, not a Sacrifice**

Some clergy are really touchy about communion. In the church that I attended in college, I was helping the minister set up communion, and one of the elders asked me to place the candlesticks on the communion table. I was doing just that when the minister glared at me and snapped, “No fire on the altar!” Injudiciously, I replied, “It’s just a candle, you know, it’s not like we’re going to sacrifice anything.” Apparently he didn’t want any association with fire on the altar lest the congregation think that we were cooking up some bull or worse. It was a formative experience for me regarding communion.

### **Don’t Attempt This at Home**

One of my favorites is about a Presbyterian minister who had a somewhat insolent teenage son. This family had a tradition of always putting out a butter dish and several slices of bread for dinner. So at every meal, just to get the goat of his father, the son, instead of simply grabbing a piece of bread and buttering it, had the annoying habit of holding the bread high over his head and breaking it in two in wicked imitation of his father breaking a piece of bread for a communicant to receive the host at communion. Finally the dad just couldn’t take it anymore and told his son, “Knock it off,” at which point the son had a rebuttal prepared, “I know, dad, you’re a professional. I shouldn’t attempt this at home.”

### **A Mystery of Sacrament: the Physical Is Infused with the Spiritual**

So communion is a sacrament. The classic definition of a sacrament is that it is an outward and physical manifestation of an inward and spiritual reality. On the outside is the physical manifestation; on the inside is the spiritual reality. On the outside is the physical; on the inside is the spiritual. There’s a link. Actually, the joining of physical and spiritual has long been considered a mystery. How is it that the spiritual, the invisible, somehow or other is linked to or infused with (different verbs can be used here) the physical?

In ancient Greece, this joining of the physical and the spiritual was called a mystery. The word for it in Greek was “mysterion,” from which we get the word “mystery” because it wasn’t clear how this joining happened. It wasn’t clear how to understand it.

The classic example of joining the physical and the spiritual is the incarnation. How is it that you have God and human together, that you have spiritual and physical together? And then, when the Vulgate Bible was translated from Greek into Latin in the early Middle Ages, the scribes translated the Greek word “mysterion” into the Latin word “sacramentum.” What we have now in English is the word “sacrament.”

The Catholics have seven sacraments, as we know. By and large in chronological order, they start off with baptism. There is a baptismal font, and water is sprinkled on the head of either an adult or a child. The outward is the water; the inward is a promise God makes to cleanse that

soul. Bear in mind the notion of original sin means to many conservative adherents that every soul, even that of a baby, needs to be cleansed.

When the child grows a little older, it undergoes the sacrament of penance, which, in accordance with the doctrine of original sin, prepares the child for first communion. But then it is forgiven, and it's something the priest must do. At a still later age, the baptismal promise is fulfilled and the child is now confirmed in the fourth sacrament.

### **Guaranteed Job Protection for the Clergy**

From the point of view of Protestant clergy, it's like guaranteed job protection. As long as you make sure that God doesn't forgive you directly, you need a minister to do it. You can imagine I have a bit of an issue with that. All the same, it does give a sense of confessing and therefore forgiveness, and then remembering that you are forgiven.

For some, you go on toward ordination, when God calls you to a particular task within the church. For many others, you go on toward matrimony, and having chosen to be married, you receive the sacrament of marriage.

Often but not necessarily toward the end of your life, there is the sacrament of anointing the sick. Somehow or other, your physical body is spiritually healed, usually by the sign of the cross with oil on your forehead or whatever part of you happens to be injured or ill. Finally, there is the sacrament of extreme unction, or last rites, most often done at the end of a person's life.

So those are the seven sacraments: baptism, penance, communion, confirmation, ordination, marriage, and anointing the sick.

### **Protestants Transmute Seven into Two**

Protestants thought this was just a little loosey goosey. It needed to be tightened up a bit. And back in the late 1500's, going into the 1600's, Protestants decided that the sacraments really ought to be limited to baptism and communion. These were the slam-dunk sacraments. The others had a certain wishy-washiness, so they settled on just the two.

In the context of that history – I know some of you come from Catholic backgrounds, some from Protestant backgrounds, some from Jewish backgrounds, and some from elsewhere – in that context, I would like to say definitively that Catholics got it wrong. There aren't just seven sacraments. Protestants got it more wrong; they went the wrong way. I'd stake my career, my life, on this because I think it's right.

I would like to ask you the question: What in God's world is *not* sacramental?

If what we read in the Statement of Oneness is at all true, "The scriptures declare that the entire kingdom of God is within us." This means by definition that every single one of us is a sacrament. "Also, we live our lives immersed in divinity." This physical life that we live, this

physical world, is swimming in a sea of divinity. And at the end of the Sunday Bulletin, there's that quote from Epimenides via St. Paul and St. Luke that says, "For God is not far from each one of us, for 'In God we live and move and have our being.'"

### **The Answer to the Question: You Are a Sacrament**

Again I ask, Can you think of anything that is not sacramental? How about changing a dirty diaper? Cleaning up after an elderly person who is incontinent? Making love? Sharing any meal with any other person? Going to work and brushing your teeth?

Can you think of anything that is not infused with the spirit of God?

Catholics got it wrong; Protestants made it worse. To use an insight from Celtic spirituality, those people have a wonderful notion that there are certain areas geographically and certain times in a person's life where and when they say the veil of mystery is thinner. That veil often prevents us from seeing clearly into the spiritual realm. So in certain places and at certain times in our lives the veil becomes thin, and you begin to see and you begin to feel.

That's what these seven are; that's what these two are. They're just places where and when it's obvious. And so if we forget and can't remember, we think that God has forsaken us. Where is God with all the trouble in the world, anyway? When we forget, these are the high points that help to remind us.

What I'd like you really to remember is that *you* are a sacrament, and therefore, you are a gift to every other person you encounter and to this world. I think it's a wonderful insight.

*Amen.*