

SOUL FOOD

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on World Communion Day, Sunday, October 1, 2017

Lectionary Readings: Exodus 17:1-7 and I Corinthians 11:17-26.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

First Among Many Doubts About Church Teaching Concerns Marriage

The very first doubt that I had about what the church taught — there have been many since, but my first one actually had to do with marriage. I was raised a good Protestant, and I had a few Catholic friends, but we never talked religion. Mostly our talk had to do with girls and basketball. Growing into my 20's, though, I became interested in what the Catholics believed because I knew it was different from my Protestant belief, but I didn't really know why.

So I learned about the seven sacraments. As a good Protestant, I knew that we had two, and they're right here in the front of the dais: holy communion and baptism. End of the story. Yet the Catholics had seven. I wondered why.

They had communion and baptism also, but they had the sacrament of marriage, the sacrament of ordination. And when a man in particular chooses to become a priest and is chosen by the church, *he* alone is ordained in ordination. There's the sacrament of confirmation, in which what's being confirmed actually represents the promises of baptism.

So you have a baby being baptized with promises made by God to this kid that are then confirmed in the teenage years.

The child joins the church and at that time receives first communion with the sacrament of confirmation. Penance and confession are what happens in the confessional booth; the forgiveness that is given by the priest to the person is considered a sacrament. And then finally comes the anointing of the sick. If this is done on a deathbed, it is called either extreme unction or last rites.

For Protestants, Roman Sacraments Were too Complex, too Unwieldy

Roman sacraments were also too open to abuse, and they were not based in scripture. So the Protestants said, hold your horses, just the two: communion and baptism. End of story.

In the discussion, which took place mostly in the time of the Reformation, between the Catholics and Protestants, the definition of a sacrament was refined and reduced, and it became actually a beautiful definition — an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace. Sometimes the wording is an inward and invisible reality. So you have the outward, the water and the baptism, the food that's on the table, but the inner is the real part, the gracious part, the divine part, the reality part. The Catholics actually didn't disagree with this definition. They pretty much bought into it as the Protestants did.

We began using the word sacrament, in our liturgy in particular, not so much in scriptures. Sacrament or *Sacramentum* in Latin, translating the word “musterion” from the Greek. And what’s the mystery, from which we get the word?

The mystery is that somehow or other flesh and divinity can coexist. It seems plain as day to the casual observer that we have the material world and then allegedly we have divinity out there. When the two come together, so comes the incarnation of Christ or other kinds of holy events that we honor in our lives. Those two come together and co-exist, and how that happened is a mystery, *musterion*, translated as a sacrament.

In the example of the Lord’s supper, there are physical things, the outward and physical stuff, and what it is signifying is being spiritually fed. We have water — outward, visible, you can touch it, feel it — signifying that somehow or other, deep inside, our soul is cleansed by the Great Soul.

An Interfaith Baptism; the Priest Slyly Interjects Roman Canon Law

I once participated in a baptism that was both Protestant and Catholic. This was back in my first church, some years and years ago, and it was with Father Steven McGough. I still remember his name, a saintly man, who was the Catholic priest in that town. And we had this little baby, whose mom was Presbyterian and his dad was Catholic. It’s like, oh, oh, what are we going to do?

So the parents asked me to sit down with the good priest and work it out, which we did. I sat down with Steve, and at that point I was very sure that he needed to do the actual baptism, so I volunteered, “Let me do the prayers, the liturgy kind of stuff. You do the

baptism. And we’re all happy.” I thought this is what really needed to happen. But he said, “No, no, no. You do the baptism. I’ll do the liturgy stuff.” Really. How can that be? Even so, he said, “Not to worry. You do it.” I replied, “Okay. You don’t have to ask me twice.”

So we do the baptism. He does the liturgy stuff. I got this adorable little baby, and I baptized it in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. I’m pulling this baby up out of the water, and I’m drying him off to show him to the congregation, when Steve, the priest, asks, “Can I hold the baby for a minute?” This wasn’t part of the liturgy, but I said, “Sure,” and I handed him the baby.

He goes over to the baptismal font, and there on the little table was a gorgeous sterling silver scallop shell. He dips that shell into the water and very rapidly — the whole thing took five seconds, maybe ten seconds — baptizes the baby again. He mumbles some words that nobody could hear while he’s baptizing the baby one more time, and I’m handed this little baby back.

One might ask, “Why did he do that?” Now I’ll tell you why. Here’s a paragraph from the Roman Canon Law, Canon I:

“If any one saith, that the sacraments of the New Law were not all instituted by Jesus Christ, our Lord; or that they are more, or less, than seven, to wit, Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Penance, Extreme Unction, Order, and Matrimony; or even that any one of these seven is not truly and properly a sacrament; let him be anathema.” Which is really bad.

Three paragraphs later, here’s the one from Canon IV:

“If any one saith, that the sacraments of the New Law are not necessary unto salvation, but superfluous; and that, without them, or without the desire thereof, men obtain of God, through faith alone, the grace of justification; though all (the sacraments) are not necessary for every individual; let him be anathema.”

In other words, despite that weird legal kind of language, the default condition of this little baby is damnation, and the only way out is to be properly baptized. As a Protestant minister and not of the Roman Catholic faith, not good enough, he had to do it slyly, on the side, quickly, because otherwise the soul of that little baby was at risk. This of course contributed to my doubts about the teaching of the church.

Are the Sacraments Two or Seven or Are They Infinite?

But my main doubt really had to do with marriage because the thought I had, despite being raised Protestant, was how could marriage NOT be a sacrament?

In my education, I learned about the Hebrew word “neshema,” which has the root of “shema.” “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” We used to say it at the beginning of our worship. “Neshema” is the Hebrew word for “soul.” And I don’t know about you, but in my understanding a marriage is not just biology. It’s not one mammal seeking out another one, but rather, the real marriage is a matter of neshema, one soul in love with another soul. The bodies are part of it in the same way as the bread and the cup, but the reality of it is the souls, a covenantal commitment of the souls. It strikes me that we should take that definition seriously! An

outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible reality.

So is it two or is it seven or is it the all, the infinite?

I would like to suggest that the soul can be part of everything and all that we do, making it sacramental, making it holy — a phone call, a handshake, a conversation, a hug, a shared meal. Actually, let me word the question differently. Is it possible for a human being to do anything devoid of soul? Where I’ve come to at this point in my life — I didn’t always believe this, but I do now — I’d like to suggest that the world is sacramental. the issue is whether we recognize it or not.

Our Birthright Is the Embrace of the Great Soul of Our Soul

To conclude, let’s look at that list of the Catholics one more time: communion, baptism, marriage, ordination, confirmation, penance, and anointing. Once again, with each of those steps, there are many, many different outward things, each with their attendant liturgy and their attendant customs and historical practices. But the inner reality, the inner grace, according to that definition is that the soul is fed, cleansed, healed, forgiven, guided, and blessed. We can shun the food, we can forsake the bath, we can sicken or reinjure ourselves, we can refuse the forgiveness, we can disregard the guidance, and we can abandon our blessedness. And we each have done that at one time or another in our lives.

But our birthright, as children of God, is the holy embrace of the Great Soul of our soul, wherein we are fed and bathed, healed, forgiven, guided, and blessed.

Amen.