



KNU International English Church

A LOVING COMMUNITY THAT CHANGES OUR WORLD.

September 25, 2011

Josh Broward

Sacraments: Channels of Grace

(Worship Series: Week 4)

Romans 6:3-8 & 1 Corinthians 11:17-29, 34

[1] Roughly one sixth of the world does not have a reliable supply of clean drinking water. More than 3.5 million people die every year because of water related illness.¹

Scientists and community organizers have tried to solve this problem in a variety of ways, but one of the most creative is atmospheric water generators. [2] AWG's take water from the air around us. In most environments, there is enough water in the air to provide clean drinking water for several families with a single AWG machine. This is an amazing technology. The water is already there. We just have to tap into it.

[3] However, we also have to recognize that this is not the normal way people get water. Normally, people go to one of three sources for their water: rivers, lakes, or wells. For many thousands of years, most people in most places have gotten most of their water from these reliable sources - rivers, lakes, and wells. This water is much easier to reach.

That's kind of how grace works. God's grace is all around us. We can experience God laying in our beds or walking on a mountain or riding a subway. Grace is in the air we breathe. We just have to tap into it.

This is beautiful and profound, but we are also wise to recognize that there are some "normal" ways to experience God's grace. There are some normal channels of grace that have proved effective means of grace, and our spiritual ancestors have been coming back to these basic channels of grace for thousands of years.

Theologians call these "means of grace." Down through the years, the Church has recognized two means of grace as being especially deep and meaningful for Christians: baptism and communion. These are often called the sacraments.

A sacrament is a living drama of God's gracious action. It is a sign pointing to grace. In a sacrament, we remember what God has done for us through Jesus. But in this remembering and re-enacting, we are also opening ourselves to God's gracious action again. It seems that we humans need to experience these very physical things - water, bread, and wine - to help us experience the fullness of God's grace. The physical is somehow connected to the spiritual. The sign pointing us to grace also becomes a channel bringing grace to us.

¹ www.water.org.

[4] Let's talk about **BAPTISM** first. Baptism is a sign of God's new covenant of grace through Jesus.² The water is a sign of God's cleansing, washing away our sins, purifying us, marking us for God's Kingdom and service.

We are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father created us, loves us, and calls us all. The Son gave his life so that we can be forgiven and set free. The Spirit actually does the work in our hearts, filling us with the Father's love and Jesus' life.

The Church of the Nazarene is a diverse community. We were formed from people of many different traditions, and we still represent many different cultures and traditions around the world. We accept baptism by sprinkling, pouring, or full immersion, and all of these have some points of reference in the New Testament.

- The author of Hebrews connected baptism with the Old Testament practice of sprinkling temple furniture with blood to purify it: "For our guilty consciences have been sprinkled with Christ's blood to make us clean, and our bodies have been washed with pure water" (Hebrews 10:22).
- The apostles often talked of God pouring his Spirit on us like water: "He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit. He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior" (Titus 3:5-6).
- In our church, we usually baptize believers who are old enough to make a conscious choice, and we usually baptize by full immersion in water. We had a big, beautiful party baptizing nine people earlier this month. The classic text explaining this kind of baptism is Romans 6:

[5]³ Or have you forgotten that when we were joined with Christ Jesus in baptism, we joined him in his death? ⁴ For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives.

⁵ Since we have been united with him in his death, we will also be raised to life as he was. ⁶ We know that our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin. ⁷ For when we died with Christ we were set free from the power of sin. ⁸ And since we died with Christ, we know we will also live with him.

Baptism is a sign of dying with Christ and dying to our old sinful life. When we go down into the water, it's like being buried. When we come up out of the water, it's like being raised with Christ to a new life in Jesus. For me, this is the fullest and most powerful way to do the sacrament of baptism.

But baptism is a sign of God's New Covenant of grace. We know that God loves us and chooses us before we can love God or make any choices for ourselves. God's love for us is pure grace. Nothing is earned. As a sign of this limitless, unearned love, Nazarenes also recognize infant baptisms. It's the parents' choice to baptize their babies or to wait for them to grow old enough to choose for themselves.

² Nazarene Article of Faith #12: *We believe that Christian baptism, commanded by our Lord, is a sacrament signifying acceptance of the benefits of the atonement of Jesus Christ, to be administered to believers and declarative of their faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior, and full purpose of obedience in holiness and righteousness. Baptism being a symbol of the new covenant, young children may be baptized, upon request of parents or guardians who shall give assurance for them of necessary Christian training. Baptism may be administered by sprinkling, pouring, or immersion, according to the choice of the applicant.*

[6] Both forms of baptism show a side of God's grace. Infant baptism shows God's love for us from the beginning before we can do anything to earn it. Believers' baptism shows God's love for us after we've walked away, sinned, and returned home for forgiveness and new life. Both are windows to the same grace.

[7] The next sacrament is **THE LORD'S SUPPER**. This is the meal of bread and wine that Jesus started with his disciples on the night before he went to the cross. Sometimes, it's called *communion* because it's a way for us to commune with God. Through communion, we spend time with God, or draw close to God, or even in a way become one with God. And other times, this meal is called the *Eucharist*, which is Greek for thanksgiving. All three names are used in the New Testament in connection with this meal. But the roots of the Lord's Supper go back to the Old Testament.

Earlier today we read about the prototype of the Lord's Supper, with a mysterious priest named Melchizedek (Genesis 14:17-20). Here is this early representative of God, who comes to Abram (later called Abraham) as Abram is just coming from a battle, and he brings him bread and wine as a sign of God's blessing. Then, he speaks God's blessing on Abram and makes the connection that God has brought Abram the victory. Abram responds with a sign of submission by giving him a tithe (a tenth) of all the loot from the battle.

These images overlap with the Lord's Supper today. We are in the midst of a life battle, and God comes to us with bread and wine and blessing. God reminds us that God brings the victory and the strength. God blesses us with his own life, and we show our submission to God by giving God a tithe of our income.

The other deep root of the Lord's Supper is the Jewish Passover meal (Exodus 12). The Passover was a special meal God taught Israel to eat celebrating their Exodus from Egypt. The Exodus was the single most important event in Israel's history. God set his people free from slavery and oppression, formed a new nation, taught them his ways, and gave them a homeland of their own.

Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples was part of the Passover celebration, and Paul says, "Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us" (1 Corinthians 5:7). Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are sometimes called the "Second Exodus." Through Jesus God sets us free from slavery to sin, forms a new people, teaches us his ways, and gives us citizenship in heaven - our true homeland.

So, now that we have these historical roots in mind, let's read Paul's description of how to celebrate the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11. You'll notice right away that Paul is talking to a church with some problems, but those problems can become very instructive for us.

[8]¹⁷ But in the following instructions, I cannot praise you. For it sounds as if more harm than good is done when you meet together. ¹⁸ First, I hear that there are divisions among you when you meet as a church, and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹ But, of course, there must be divisions among you so that you who have God's approval will be recognized!

²⁰ When you meet together, you are not really interested in the Lord's Supper. ²¹ For some of you hurry to eat your own meal without sharing with others. As a result, some go hungry while others get drunk. ²² What? Don't you have your own homes for eating and drinking? Or do you really want to disgrace God's church and shame the poor? What am I supposed to say? Do you want me to praise you? Well, I certainly will not praise you for this!

[9] ²³ For I pass on to you what I received from the Lord himself. On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread ²⁴ and gave thanks to God for it. Then he broke it in pieces and said, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this to remember me." ²⁵ In the same way, he took the cup of wine after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant between God and his people—an agreement confirmed with my blood. Do this to remember me as often as you drink it." ²⁶ For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are announcing the Lord's death until he comes again.

[10] ²⁷ So anyone who eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord unworthily is guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ That is why you should examine yourself before eating the bread and drinking the cup. ²⁹ For if you eat the bread or drink the cup without honoring the body of Christ, you are eating and drinking God's judgment upon yourself... ³⁴ If you are really hungry, eat at home so you won't bring judgment upon yourselves when you meet together. I'll give you instructions about the other matters after I arrive.

[11] The Lord's Supper is a window to the Trinity. God the Father is the Host and Invite-or, calling us to the meal. Jesus provides the food and drink through his life, death, and resurrection. The Spirit makes it real, alive, and meaningful for us and in us.

When we celebrate this meal, we are celebrating all that God has done for us through Jesus. Because of Jesus' body and blood, our sins are forgiven, we have new life now in this moment, and we will live forever with God in heaven.

Baptism is the sign of our entrance into God's family through Jesus. Communion is the sign of our continuing dependence on Jesus. Jesus gives us the spiritual food and drink to continue this Christian journey. Only through Jesus can we be saved. Only through Jesus can we stay saved. Only through Jesus can we be made free. Only through Jesus can we live free.

OK, now let's answer a few FAQs about the Lord's Supper.

1. What actually happens to the bread and wine? This is the subject of great debate within Christianity. As far as I can tell, the most common Christian opinion is also the one closest to the Bible. The bread doesn't literally become Jesus' body and cup doesn't hold Jesus' actual blood. You can't find his DNA here. This is a mysterious sign of Jesus' body and blood. However, God does something mysterious when we celebrate communion. This is one of those deep rivers of grace. Somehow, the experience of grace through sight, touch, taste, smell, and sound can do something deep in us. Jesus can be hard to experience. God can be hard to define. The Spirit is like the wind. But this bread and cup - this we can touch. This we can hold and put into our body as a sign of our faith and dependence on Jesus. If God blesses this moment with his Spirit, and if we are open, this can change us.

2. **What kind of stuff are we supposed to use?** For this, I find Paul helpful again. He said, “When we bless the cup at the Lord’s Table, aren’t we sharing in the blood of Christ? And when we break the bread, aren’t we sharing in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ And though we are many, we all eat from one loaf of bread, showing that we are one body” (1 Corinthians 10). Communion is a sign of our unity in Christ, so as much as possible, we should use a single loaf of bread and a single cup. How many of you grew up doing communion with those little Styrofoam wafers? I don’t really get that. The point of those is that the Jewish Passover meal was celebrated with bread without yeast, so that’s probably the kind of bread used at the Last Supper. But it’s my humble opinion that the first Christians probably used whatever bread was available since they weren’t always celebrating the Passover. Now, in our church, we use grape juice not wine. That’s for two reasons. First, the Church of the Nazarene started in the time of prohibition in the USA, so we’ve had a long standing resistance to alcohol. Second, some Christians here in our church think that alcohol is always wrong, so we don’t want create disunity through this meal which is supposed to strengthen our unity.
3. **Who can participate?** Here I’ll quote John Wesley (one of our spiritual fore-fathers): “Is not the eating of that bread, and the drinking of that cup, the outward, visible means, whereby God conveys into our souls all that spiritual grace, that righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost, which were purchased by the body of Christ once broken and the blood of Christ once shed for us? Let all, therefore, who truly desire the grace of God, eat of that bread, and drink of that cup.”³ Anyone who truly wants God’s grace through Jesus can come.
4. **What’s the deal with participating in the Lord’s Supper unworthily?** Paul said, “So anyone who eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord unworthily is guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 11:27). Remember that Paul was writing to a church that was having problems. Back then the Lord’s Supper was kind of like our potluck dinners, but they didn’t all sit at one table. Friends kind of sat together, and rich folks were mostly friends with rich folks, and the same for the poor. So the rich people would be having this feast of great food and lots of wine - without even realizing that their poor brothers and sisters at the next table didn’t have enough to eat. Paul said that was the exact opposite of the unity Jesus intended through the Lord’s Supper. In fact, the Christian Church soon corrected this problem, and part of the celebration of the Lord’s Supper was bringing food for the poor as well.⁴ So today, if you want to participate in the Lord’s Supper in a worthy way, make sure you share with the poor. That’s one of the reasons we have the offering basket here. We aren’t buying admission or paying membership dues or bargaining for grace. We are submitting to God and sharing with others.
5. **If we celebrate the Lord’s Supper too often, doesn’t stop being special or reverent?** Again, let me defer to John Wesley. He explained that the newness may wear off, but a deeper truer significance will deepen over time. Think about the

³ John Wesley, “The Means of Grace,” <http://new.gbgbm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/16/2/>. downloaded 9.22.2011.

⁴ Robert Webber, *Worship Is a Verb*, (Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 56.

communion of marriage. Should you only say “I love you” a few times a year so that it still feels special? And all the women said, “Forget special! Let’s have communion every day.” Or how about this: should you only have sex a few times a year so that it still feels special? And all the men said: “Forget special! Let’s have communion every day.” The Lord’s Supper is one way of communion with God. It’s a deep channel of God’s grace, so Wesley said, “Only see that you are duly prepared for it, and the oftener you come to the Lord's table, the greater benefit you will find there.”⁵

6. **So how do we prepare well for the Lord’s Supper?** Here are a few basic steps.
- a. *Quiet your heart.* Spend a little time in silence waiting before God. Maybe you’ll think about the sermon. Maybe you’ll just be quiet.
 - b. *Leave your sin.* When you stand and walk, imagine leaving your old life behind you. Leave your failures. Leave the wrongs done against you.
 - c. *Come to Jesus.* You are walking away from selfishness into love. You are walking away from sin straight into Jesus’ life. Claim that. Have you had a hard week? Have you sinned or failed or been betrayed? Leave it, and walk to Jesus. Put your trust in the body and blood of Christ to give you new life through the Spirit.

[12] Remember those machines that get water from air? You can get water anywhere. It’s all around us. It’s in the air we breath. God’s grace is like that. You can find grace in a tree or a flower or a movie or a bowl of rice if you have your spiritual eyes open. But there are some channels of God’s grace, like deep rivers that have stood the test of time. Generation after generation, God’s people keep coming back to these means of grace -- because they work. God really does meet us here. God really does use baptism and communion to open us to his grace. They are signs of the living Gospel. Come and let God make you new.

⁵ John Wesley, “The Duty of Constant Communion,” <http://new.gbqm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/101/>. downloaded. 9.22.2011.