

“Sacramental Living”

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Luke 24:28-31; I Corinthians 11:23-26

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Since we are having communion today, I am going to put off my last sermon in the “Back to Basics” series until next Sunday, and speak today in a more communion-related way.

About ten years ago I was at a conference with 30 other Presbyterian pastors and heard a great sermon by Father Robert Hansel, an Episcopal priest. I didn’t take notes. I don’t remember what he titled his sermon, or precisely what he said, but his core idea stuck with me, and the sermon you are about to hear is my own presentation on his basic message that day. So if you get anything out of the message today, all credit goes to the Lord and Father Hansel.

Let me begin. Some of the more famous people in our time have been known by signature actions. The comedian Carol Burnett, I notice, still tugs on her right ear. Late night talk show host, Johnny Carson, was known for doing an imaginary golf swing right before his nightly monologue. Talk show host Conan O’Brien is known for his string dance. Basketball great Kareem Abdul Jabbar was known for his “Sky Hook.” Golfer Tiger Woods, in his winning days, was known for his arm and fist pump when he made a good shot.

The late Fred Rogers had his own signature actions as well. Fred was educated at one of our Presbyterian seminaries, Pittsburgh Seminary, and was the only Presbyterian minister ever ordained in our denomination to work in children’s ministry through television.

Fred, as you may know, was once the host of the PBS children’s TV show “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood.” Those of you who remember his show may remember that he started off every show by doing four things. First, he would come into the house, opening and shutting the door behind him; then he would start singing the opening song “It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood; a beautiful day for a neighbor. Would you be mine? Could you be mine?” Then, as he was singing, he would first take off his suit coat and hang it up in the closet and put on a sweater, and then he would take off his street shoes and put on his tennis shoes. Every single show would start off the same way, with those four defining signature actions—opening the door, singing the song, putting on the sweater and putting on the tennis shoes. Those four actions were the way you knew for sure that it was Mr. Rogers and the beginning of a new episode of “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood.”

It may or may not surprise you to know that Jesus, our Lord and Savior, also had some defining, signature actions of his own by which he had come to be known by his disciples in both his earthly life in the flesh and in his resurrection.

In our story this morning did you notice the moment Jesus' disciples recognize the stranger at their dinner table as the risen Christ? When he took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them. The story says that at that very moment, the moment of those four signature actions, the disciples' eyes were opened and they recognized the risen Lord in their midst.

Take, bless, break, give—those were Jesus' four defining signature actions. He must have carried out those four actions many times in his earthly life for his disciples in Emmaus to recognize by those actions that they had the risen Lord in their midst.

We know for sure that Jesus did it at the feeding of the 5,000, and then again at the feeding of the 4,000. In each case the story says specifically that he took the bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to his disciples. He did it again in the upper room, when he celebrated the first communion with his disciples on the night before his death. That story again says he took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to his disciples. Then he did it again in the house in Emmaus. The story says he took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to his disciples. The apostle Paul, in his letter to the church at Corinth, recalls the four signature actions of Jesus. These were the four defining, signature actions for which Jesus became known.

The gospel stories associate Jesus four defining, signature actions only with food. But when I play with these stories, my holy imagination makes me think that that Jesus did it a lot. I get the sense that Jesus took those four actions whenever he was given something in this life. I wonder if it had become his natural, automatic response to being presented with a gift of some kind—take, bless, break, give.

I want to get our bodies involved in our learning today. I want today's message to get into our bones and muscles. My experience tells me that when our bodies are joined to our heads, it makes for a powerful and memorable learning experience.

I want to lead you this morning through a four-part exercise with your arms and hands. Yes, we are going to do a little exercise in church right now (and try not to bonk the person in front of you or on your side!)

I am going to demonstrate for you a four-part movement, and after I demonstrate it for you, I will want you to do it on your own, so pay attention.

You start by imagining that someone has placed a gift in front of you. The first movement is to reach out in front of you with open hands and close your hands around that gift and bring it into your chest.

Next, open your hands with the gift inside and lift them up.

Next, close your hands around the gift and break it in half.

Finally, take your two hands with the broken gifts inside and open your hands and extend them out.

Take, bless, break, give.

Now you try it: take, bless, break, give. Take, bless, break, give. Take, bless, break, give.

Now let me comment on the meaning of those four actions.

First, take. Jesus teaches us by example that when someone gives you a gift, however small or large or in-between, you honor God and that person whenever you humbly accept it, receive it and take possession of it.

Before the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus was presented with a little boy who was willing to share his lunch of five barley rolls and two sardines. The lunch was presented to Jesus. What did Jesus do? He took it. He didn't refuse it. He didn't reject it. He didn't make fun of it. He took it seriously. He received it. He accepted it. He took possession of it. 5,000 people needed to be fed, and in response a little lunch was presented, Jesus took it. Jesus entertained the idea that that little lunch could be the way that God chose to meet the need of the 5,000 that day.

Sometimes someone offers us a gift, and it seems too small, too trivial, too inconsequential, or something we don't want, so we reject it out of a lack imagination. We're dismissive of what looks like a too small gift. Other times someone offers us a huge gift and we reject it out of a false modesty. "Oh, no, that's too much. I could never accept that."

I heard a story once of an American surgeon who went over to India and did a life-saving surgery on a boy and didn't charge the family for it. The boy's mother was so grateful that she wanted to do something for the surgeon, so she ran home and came back and presented the surgeon with a chicken egg. She was so poor that that is all she had to give him, but she was so grateful she wanted to give him something. The surgeon said he felt embarrassed receiving that egg from that woman because he himself was so rich compared with her, and that egg might be the only thing she had to eat that day, but he

also knew that he must accept it. To deny that woman a chance to give would have been a humiliation to her. She needed to give. She needed a practical way of expressing thanks.

Jesus also teaches us to take, to receive, to accept, whatever gift someone is trying to give us, whatever comes into your life in any way, no matter how small, how big or in-between, no matter how attractive or unattractive. You take it, rather than reject it—taking, receiving, accepting the gift is the beginning of a sacramental or holy transaction in the world.

Jesus teaches us next that after you take whatever gift you are given in this life and you “bless” it, which means two things. First, to bless means to thank God for something, to acknowledge that it is God who ultimately gave you that gift, a God who often chooses to give us gifts through other people. You don’t complain to God about the gift. You don’t grouse about it being too small or too big or not enough or anything else. You thank God for it because everything you have in this life comes ultimately from God.

To bless also has a second meaning, which is that you are asking God to take that gift and transform it, convert it from something human and ordinary and limited to something divine, sacred, and extraordinary. To bless something is to ask God to do with it what only God can do. When you bless a gift that you have received, you are offering it up to God, giving it back to God, and asking God to do something with it that goes beyond what you could do yourself, and to make it a blessing to others.

The third thing Jesus does with the gift is to break it, that is, he gets it ready to share. Jesus doesn’t just take the five loaves and turn around and give them to others whole, he breaks them. He prepares them in anticipation of giving them away. He breaks them down into their component parts, he divides them, he separates them. There is some work for him to do with the gift before he can actually share it.

Every gift we receive in this life may well be multi-faceted and meant for more than one person, and it requires some preparation on our part before we can share it, and when we bless the gift, when we offer it up to God for God to use it in a way that blesses others, God gives us wisdom as to how to prepare the gift for sharing, to get it ready.

Sometimes we are the one who has to be broken in life so that our true gift to the world can emerge.

Finally, Jesus teaches us to take whatever gift we have received, and after blessing it and preparing it, give it away to others, to share it, to distribute it.

Jesus teaches us that God meant all of us to be a kind of flow-thru for all the gifts that God has given us. We were not meant to hoard our gifts or store them up, to stack them

up, to keep them permanently, but to give them away. God gives us gifts in order to give us something to share.

The wonderful ending of the feeding of the 5,000 story is that when Jesus took the little boys' lunch, small though it seemed, and dealt with it sacramentally—taking it, blessing it, breaking it and giving it—it proved to be enough and more than enough for all 5,000 people.

I have come to believe with Father Hansel that when Jesus took, blessed, broke and gave bread at so many of his meals, he wasn't just acting as host and making sure everyone got enough bread; he wasn't just leaving behind a holy meal to help us remember his deep and passionate love for us, like the one we will shortly celebrate together; he was also giving his original disciples, and us by the Holy Spirit, a whole new approach to human life, just like his own approach: taking possession of the life and the gifts he had received from God, blessing them, breaking them and giving them away..

How do we know when the risen Christ is present with us right now? We know from the scriptures that Christ is with us at the table, and in the Word, read and interpreted. And we also know that Christ is present when we see each other living our lives as Christ, that is, sacramentally, taking each thing that is given to us in this life, including our own lives, blessing it, breaking it and giving it away.

Join me once more in Jesus' four signature actions: take, bless, break, give.

Apostles' Creed

I BELIEVE in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth,

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen