

God Among Us Now

by Rev. Joe Connolly

As you know, earlier we had a celebration of Baptism. Baptism is a sacrament, a sacrament being an outward and visible sign of the grace of God. But there are a number of ways to look at Baptism. Let me elaborate.

For instance, it can be said *in* and *with* and *by* Baptism we welcome someone into a community of faith, a local church. It can be said *in* and *with* and *by* Baptism we welcome someone into not just the local community of faith but the greater Christian community. It can be said *in* and *with* and *by* Baptism we welcome someone as a child of God.

But equally, it can be said Baptism is simply an acknowledgment on our part the newly Baptized is *already* a member of the local community of faith, *already* a member of the greater community, *already* a child of God. Put differently, nothing we do— no act of ours— makes a person a member of the local or greater community of faith or a child of God. Nothing we do imposes, dispenses, administers or inflicts some kind magic on an individual which in some way alters them.

To be clear, this claim is *not* to say the very ritual, the very act, the very actions we take, the celebration of the sacrament of Baptism— in and of itself— fails to be significant. It is significant. *Our actions* are *the* very thing the definition claims: an outward sign.

What I *am* trying to say about this ritual, this act, this sacrament— Baptism— is we should *not* read into the ritual, the act, the sacrament our *cultural* misconceptions *or* our desires, our wants, our emotions, our dreams about what Baptism is or is not. The nature of this sacrament, the nature of the two sacraments of the Protestant tradition— Baptism and Communion— is that they are not about us. (Slight pause.)

So, if the sacraments are not about us, what are they about? (Slight pause.) The sacraments are about God and the grace of God and the presence of God. (Slight pause.) *Sacraments are about God and the grace of God and the presence of God.* (Slight pause.)

We find these words in the work known as the Gospel according to the School of John: “Philip said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, show us God, and we will be satisfied.’ Jesus replied, ‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen *Abba* God. How can you say, ‘Show us God?’” (Slight pause.)

I want to try a little thirty or forty second experiment. What I am going to ask is that each of us find another person, just one, perhaps someone whom you are sitting near and I was going to say this person should not really be a relative but we have so many folks who are relatives today, maybe we can get away with that. But if possible not a relative, O.K.? The idea was to take relationship of relative out of the equation but it will be tougher today. [1]

So, if you’re not sitting near someone, please move toward them. And this means someone needs to go with Bob Oehme— Bob— he came down from the loft he’s in back— I warned him, so this is good— he’s not up at the organ. O.K. Everyone get a partner. If there are is an odd number of people here today there will be one group of three. (Pause while people rearrange themselves.)

O.K. Looks like everyone’s paired up. Now, please do what I ask when I say ‘go’ everyone look into the eyes of your partner. This will last about thirty or forty seconds and I’ll time it.

Don't say anything. There is no need to touch one another. Just look into the eyes of your partner. And I will let you know when time is up. O.K. Go! (Pause for the duration.) Amen. O.K.! If you moved too far you can go back to where you were if you want to— not a problem. Go ahead. (Pause for people to reassemble.)

O.K. I am not going to offer answers about this time together, but the obvious questions are: 'How did that feel?' Awkward. 'What did you see?' I am sure each of you has your own answer. Equally, I am sure for some people it was deeply moving. Others may have been asking, "What is Joe trying to get me into now?" (Slight pause.)

Now that we've had this exercise, let's go back to the sacraments. I suggested the sacraments are not about us. The sacraments are about God and the grace of God and the presence of God.

Hence, for me, the Sacraments beg the question, "Where is God?" Indeed, let's take what Philip says (quote:) "Rabbi, show us God and we will be satisfied." I think the underlying question being asked by Philip really is, "Where... is... God?" (Slight pause.)

Given that question— "Where is God?" let's turn to the rite we will be celebrating in a few moments, the Rite of Confirmation. In the Protestant tradition— as opposed to the Roman Catholic tradition— we do not call Confirmation a sacrament. We call it a rite of the church.

And, just like Baptism, it is a ritual performed in community. Just like Baptism, I would argue one of the things Confirmation is about is community. Last I would argue, just like Baptism, the grace of God makes God's own self available to us in the Rite of Confirmation.

However, I would also argue that, unlike Baptism, with Confirmation both the individual and we in the community of faith need to be proactive in participating in the grace offered by God with the rite. Indeed, while the grace of God is present, the reality of that grace is it needs our active participation to come to a state of full fruition, to come to a place of full enhancement.

In fact, over the years I've said Confirmation is *not* a rite of passage for teens. The Rite of Confirmation is often looked at that way but to see Confirmation as a rite of passage is a very, very, very secular way of looking at it.

What I have said is all adults should go through the process of Confirmation every fifteen or twenty years. Why? The point of Confirmation is that it can be a process of renewal, refreshment and revitalization for us on our faith journey. Our active participation is a key part of the rite because continues once the ritual is finished.

The culture has unfortunately attached baggage to the rite. The first piece of baggage is the aforementioned idea that Confirmation is a rite of passage. It is not.

Another is many think Confirmation is something which happens *to* them rather than the person being confirmed striving to participate *in* and *with* the grace God offers. The short version of my point is simple. Our active participation *with* God is vital not just or only in the process called Confirmation but in the journey called life. (Slight pause.)

All this circles back to asking you to look into the eyes of your neighbor. And all this circles back to what I think Philip is really asking: "Where is God?" (Slight pause.)

You see, the claim of Christianity is simple. Christ lives. But Christ lives where— in time, in space, in a place?

(Slight pause.)

I want to suggest Christ is here, among us. Christ lives with us. Christ is reflected in each of us and in all of us, reflected in the community. Indeed, we call it the community of Christ.

I also want to suggest two things are necessary to constitute the community of Christ. First, the grace of God as found in the sacraments is necessary. God acts; we experience the grace of God.

Second, our participation in the grace God offers as found in the rites of the church such as Confirmation and our participation in the life of the church is vital. Together these rituals are a reminder to us that God is with us, Christ lives, and that the community which surrounds us is the dwelling place of God. God lives among us; Christ is with us.

Further, given the grace God offers through this community of Christ, we can find forgiveness, equity, peace, joy, hope, freedom and the love of God in each of us as we support one another on the journey called life. So, as we experience this journey called life, let's keep looking in each others eyes. Why? God lives among us; Christ is with us. Amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: "It has been argued we Americans have a religious culture. I would suggest, rather, that we are not a religious culture. We are culturally religious. That's a big difference. And I think being culturally religious— a religiosity which derives from the culture— is not what God seeks. Rather God encourages us to participate with God in this world in a religious culture which embodies forgiveness, equity, peace, joy, hope, freedom and the love of God in each other as we support each other on the journey called life. Culturally religious populations only pretend to embodied forgiveness, equity, peace, joy, hope, freedom and love. Pretending doesn't work with God."

BENEDICTION: Jesus assures us we will be empowered to do great works. We are, in fact, representatives of Christ, as we share the gifts God has granted us. And may the love of God the creator which is real, the Peace of Christ which surpasses all understanding and the companionship of the Holy Spirit which is ever present, keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge of God and in the care of God this day and forever more. Amen.

[1] As the Sacrament of Baptism and the Rite of Confirmation were both celebrated this day *and* the Bell Choir played two anthems, there were a lot of visitors and relatives present.