



Rector's Essay - The Strength of Sacraments

By Jarrett Kerbel (06/05/26)

On a number of occasions in my ministry, I have had the following exchange with a church member;

“I would love to bring home communion to your husband at the nursing home,” I offer.

“Oh, thank you, but his dementia is so advanced that he will not understand it,” his wife replies.

The good news about sacraments, however, is this; sacraments deliver the loving presence and grace of God in a way that far surpasses our cognition. The meaning and power of a sacrament is not constrained by our ability to decipher its ‘symbolic’ representation.

While sacraments have a symbolic dimension, they are much more than that. A sacrament participates in the reality of God and communicates God’s tangible presence in the material of the sacrament and the action of sharing the sacrament. For example, our communion bread and wine - in the Episcopal tradition - Jesus Christ is really present in the bread and the wine offering us an eternal connection with God. Jesus is present in the act of sharing the elements and in communal sharing of them as well.

God’s grace is sufficient and powerful to the degree that grace is imparted even when our faculties are dimmed. When someone is suffering from Alzheimer's or dementia this is incredibly good news. By ingesting the sacrament this person is fed by the bread of life and cup of salvation in a way beyond our full comprehension. God reaches that beloved person at a deep level even when we struggle to connect with them at all.

Our dominant Protestant culture is premised on denuding and disenchanting material reality, starting with sacraments. One result is the unfortunate idea that meaning and significance are assigned by our brains to objects in the world which are considered inert and empty until humans assign them meaning. The Anglican worldview is a counter-culture where we experience the material world as deeply imbued and sustained by God's abiding, loving presence. God's desire to communicate and include us in the divine life lives in and comes through all which God made good and all which God has redeemed and all the gifts God has given us for the purpose of restoration with God.

Some folks say that children should not receive communion because 'they do not understand it.' Once again, this perspective unfairly limits the power of the sacrament to our mental ability. Children understand the sacrament in their own terms and the grace of connection with God is as real for them as it is for us. Thanks be to God.