

## SACRAMENTAL LIVING: A DISTINCTIVE SPIRITUALITY

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As a boy I reveled in the opportunities to go to my grandparents' farm in northwest Iowa. The sights, sounds, and smells that surrounded me were sources of endless fascination. In the morning, loaves of bread at the store, my aunt mixed the ingredients, kneaded the dough, and placed it in a pan covered with a tea towel to let it rise. In the middle of the night, she would get up and punch the dough down, and it would rise again.

Bread was baking in the oven that summer morning when my aunt and I heard my father calling us from the field beyond the horse barn. We ran to see what was the matter. As the sun rose, we could see that the horses had pulled away from the hay wagon. There on the ground, the reins still grasped in his hands, was grandpa's broken body, his blood on the stubble beneath his chin. With that matrix of memories haunting my dreams for years: bread, a broken body, shepherds.

Over time the images of that experience and the words and actions of the Eucharist interpenetrate each other, creating a new matrix of meaning. It is no longer merely a recollection of something that happened in the past, but a transforming event for the present that leads into the future.

As the two of us have thought and written about sacramental living, we have discovered that our own experiences like this one, clues to a distinctive spirituality.<sup>1</sup> For us, the ordinary, everyday events of life have been windows that shed light on the presence of God in us and in our world.

The word "spirituality" is used in many ways today.<sup>2</sup> As I (Linda) wrestled to understand how the terms a wide audience of adults could engage for a chapter I was writing on "Reckoning Our Lives of Adult Educators"<sup>3</sup>, I used spirituality as a broad term. It takes on particular meaning in the stories and rituals of the particular faith community that has helped to shape one's life and the ways one experiences mystery. I concluded that "our spiritual lives reflect the commitments out of which we live, work, play and pray."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dwight W. Vogel and Linda J. Vogel, *Sacramental Living: Falling Stars and Coloring Outside the Lines* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup> In *Addressing the Spiritual Dimensions of Adult Learning: What Educators Can Do*, Leona M. English, Marie A. Gillen (eds.), San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000, pp. 17-27.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 18.

Here, however, we are talking about a more focused meaning. For us, Christian spirituality is what nourishes our being, our thinking and our doing, and it empowers us for discipleship in its interior, personal aspects of discipleship; but it also includes the relational, communal aspects as well as our action in the world. Christian spirituality draws us into worshipping, learning within the Church and propels us beyond the Christian community to seek connections and striving to work for the common good of all creation. Spirituality involves our whole being and living becomes an embodied Christian spirituality.

A sacrament is a "sacred sign" or a "visible word" (Augustine). In a sacrament, a reality of immediate apprehension is perceived by our senses. What we perceive is a sign of something that is immediately at hand. In sacraments, a mysterious and transcendent reality comes to our experience through sign/acts we perceive. A sacrament is a perceptible symbol of the sacred, both in and beyond sense perception. We call this *grace*--God's free gift of love and care. Sacraments not only point to this grace but through which we receive this gift of God's life-transforming love.<sup>6</sup> The symbols themselves are polyvalent, with many layers of meaning defying precise identification which a sacrament points to is greater and deeper and richer than what we perceive. But it opens us up to that mystery which is in and yet beyond it.

When Jesus took the towel and basin, he was not only removing the dust from his disciples' feet; it was a sign of the nature of his own ministry, and it has implications for the ministry of those whose feet Jesus washed, and for all disciples who follow him. When Jesus shared bread and wine at the Last Supper, he was not primarily addressing the physical hunger and thirst of the disciples; it and becomes a sign of the new covenant, a community established and sustained by God.

When the seven are set apart to meet the needs of a group being ignored by the Church, it is not merely a way of dealing with a particular problem at a particular time in history. Rather, that action (recorded in Acts 6:1-6) embodied then--and challenges the church to embodying ministries of justice as intrinsic to the life and mission of the Church.

Thus, our understanding of sacramental living extends beyond *the* Sacraments (whether from a tradition with two or from one with seven!). To call something sacramental is to call it an "unusually transparent experience" which reveals a much deeper reality. It not only points

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<sup>5</sup> Dwight W. Vogel, *Food for Pilgrims: A Journey with Saint Luke* (Akron, OH: OSL Publications, 1996), p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Dwight W. Vogel and Linda J. Vogel, *Sacramental Living: Falling Stars and Coloring Outside the Lines* (Upper Room Books, 1999), p. 22.

participates in that reality. "Living sacramentally is 'being in touch' with sources for spirit 'beyond' or 'beneath' or 'within' what appears to our senses."<sup>7</sup>

### *Learning to See: the Sacrament of the Ordinary*

Much of the time we *see what we know* rather than *knowing what we see*! Our pre-conceived ideas about the way things are and what to expect keep us from "having" describing the purpose for using parables, Jesus observes that there are many who "see, perceive, and hearing, do not listen, nor do they understand." But, he says to the disciples, "your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear." (cf. Matt. 13:10-17)

Like the disciples who walked with Jesus as he healed and listened to his teaching to see and understand. But when we open ourselves to the possibility of seeing God at the ordinariness of our daily living, we will be blessed. This kind of openness to the Holy Spirit in the times and places of our lives, we call sacramental living.

God's love and grace is woven into the stories of our lives. When we go out onto a cabin in the Black Hills of South Dakota, the crisp early morning air and the diamond-like waving grass in our meadow are signs of the gift of God's marvelous creation. They are a responsible action in protecting the air and water of our land and our world. For a Christian, dewdrops and lightening bolting across the sky and the call of a mountain bluebird can be good gifts and of God's call to us to be co-creators who act on behalf of creation. When we see, our living can become sacramental.

Those who would be disciples of Jesus must seek to be open to seeing the marginalized and outcast as children of God for whom Christ died. We must learn to see in the Samaritan, the Magdalene, a faithful witness to the risen Christ; in the leper, one who desires wholeness; and in children, the beloved of God.

When one of the children at our church asks the congregation to pray for a classmate who was killed in a drive-by shooting, we become aware that God's Word often comes in the "little ones" who live in a world that, in systemic and impersonal ways, shuts them out. A Jewish writer, Jonathan Kozol, helps us see God through the eyes of little children at school, on the streets, and in the celebrations of the Eucharist. There can be no doubt that living sacramentally requires

<sup>7</sup> Dwight W. Vogel, *Food for Pilgrims*, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Kozol is the author of several books about children in one of the poorest and most segregated neighborhoods in the United States. He helps us see God's grace at work in little children like Pineapple—a little girl whose trust and tenacity put most Christians to shame. See *Amazing Grace* (1995) and *Ordinary Resurrections* (2000).

intently to little children. They often see and name what we have learned to block out painful.

Learning to see is a life-long process. The first instant something hits our optic nerve, our wonderfully complex brain sends that image over well-worn pathways to make sense of past experiences. It is not really a conscious choice that we so often “see what we know.” It takes constant vigilance to require our brain to do a double-take. Is that really what I think it really is, really what it seems at first or is something else going on here? What assumptions am I making that have to be called into question?

Surely, Jesus’ disciples must have had to do that when they returned to find Jesus talking to a Samaritan woman in serious conversation. Some of the Pharisees often seemed unable to see. They were continually assuming that Jesus was breaking God’s laws and was, therefore, to be destroyed. Even Jesus was required to engage in this process of backing up and taking a second look when he was confronted with the persistence of the Syrophenician woman’s faith (see Mk. 7:24-31).

Learning to see is something we have to do every day in every place we find ourselves. We take comfort when we see how many times Jesus’ disciples failed to see. But we may also try to remember impetuous Peter. He vowed to follow Jesus to the death only to deny him three times. The cock crowed. But he became the Rock on which God built the Church and, in the end, he was called to be faithful even to death. God does not give up on those who keep trying to see and understand.

We miss much of the sense of mystery in sacramental living because the ordinary becomes so familiar that we take it for granted. There are two ways in which we can go beyond this “ordinariness” to the ordinary.<sup>9</sup> Something may happen over which we have no control. It comes as a gift, like a falling star in the heavens. We did not create it or manipulate it. It just happens. But if we are not looking or we will miss it. If we are looking in the opposite direction, we won’t see the star. If we are focused on the lamplight, we will miss the falling star.

What makes such experiences sacramental is recognizing that they come as grace. We “rend the veil” of routine appropriation and we see beneath the obvious to the presence of a mystery within and yet beyond those “falling stars.”

But we can also break through the ordinariness of the ordinary by learning to “color outside the lines,” that is, by learning to see in new ways by refusing to be constricted by the patterns we have learned. There are times when those patterns are helpful; they bring order out of chaos. But there are times when they are not.

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<sup>9</sup> For further development of this perspective, see chapter one “Falling Starts and Coloring Outside the Lines: Wonder” in Vogel and Vogel, *Sacramental Living*.

when they build walls that keep us from knowing what we see. We may have learned the presence of God's grace in a chalice or a font or the Bible. But when we look only there, we miss the sacramental potential of the ordinary things around us: the bread, the cup, the water, and the witnesses of faith through which God's mysterious and transforming presence is also present.

### *Re-membering: the Sacrament of Story*

"Tell me a story," our children would say as we tucked them into bed. It is a requirement in our human experience. A lecture or homily may be circling in outer space for us, but to tell or hear a story, something changes. A story seems like a rather ordinary thing---a series of places and events strung together as narrative.

When we examine what happens when a story is told, however, we discover our own presence of mystery. That story may start out "inside someone's head" with the remembered sequence of events. In "telling a story," this sequence is articulated through speech or "projection" is now "outside" the speaker or writer's body--in sound waves or as marks on a page. The listener or reader encounters those sounds or markings, and interprets them according to the meaning available in the culture or cultures of the speaker/writer and hearer/reader.

The story is not the speaker/writer's mental images as such, but in and through the act of telling, the hearer/reader is able to share something of that thought world. *A story means more than the sum of its sentences and sequences carry interwoven connotations. They point beyond themselves to other meanings. Sometimes they enable us not only to remember together, but to participate in the story, both "get inside" the story and to let the story "get inside" us. When we experience the presence of the transcendent within it, story can become a sacrament for us.*

This is true for what at first appear to be ordinary stories. The family in which one of my grandmothers grew up set out to homestead on the prairies of western Kansas. What they got, the grasshoppers did. After several years of vain attempts to wrest a living from the prairie, they returned "home" to Missouri. The family didn't even have to tell that story to make reference to it. "It isn't worth a farm in Kansas," my grandmother would say as her ultimate negative judgment.

My years as a teen-age boy found me growing up in Abilene, Kansas. I knew that the farms of western Kansas were worth a lot. The specific sentence didn't make a lot of sense to me at the time. But on another level I knew it was part of my family's story. It carried with it the knowledge of how to "make do" with what you had, with surviving against great odds, with working in the face of adversity, and knowing when it was time to "go home." And beyond that, the realization that the Cramers had been a praying people before they left for Kansas. The

people all the time they tried to sing the Lord's song is a strange land. They were still a when they returned "home." Behind and within the story was the affirmation: "nothing separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

Individual and family stories can become sacramental when we hear them in tandem with the stories of our community of faith. The Hebrew scripture is formed around the stories of people called out—to receive a wonderful gift, to enter into a special relationship with God, and to bring the good news to the nations." Many of these biblical stories help us see what happens when folks focus on the privilege side of a promise and forget to remember the responsibility side!

One of our students<sup>10</sup> wrote a master's thesis that included a retreat curriculum to help 12-18 year olds and their parents prepare for participating in the Eucharist. She uses the stories of the manna in the wilderness, the feeding of the 5,000, and the Last Supper as stories to bring into the celebration of Eucharist. When biblical stories intersect with our own experiences (like Dwight's grandfather's death and the powerful Eucharist celebration at our wedding months ago) our understandings can be transformed and we can change.

By entering into stories, children and adults are able to make connections and to live more fully. Stories have the potential to touch us at every level of our existence. They involve our hearts to the deepest levels of our being. They can convict us, challenge us, hold us steady, comfort us, and act in new ways.

Walter Brueggeman<sup>11</sup> suggests that in the Torah, the primary answer to any question is "you a story." Story is open-ended and invites the hearers to enter in imaginatively and to live for themselves.

There is a human need to feel connected and to "become part of a larger story."<sup>12</sup> When we are invited to bring their own personal and family stories into dialogue with the stories of the Bible, there is potential for seeing in new ways and for lives being transformed. Whenever stories are translucent—lenses through which we encounter God at work in our world in ordinary people and relationships—they are sacramental.

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<sup>10</sup> Cheryl T. Magrini, "Welcoming Children at the Banquet Table," (Unpublished M.T.S. Thesis, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982, pp. 14-39.

<sup>12</sup> Herbert Anderson, Edward Foley, *Mighty stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998, p. 27.

## *Community: the Sacrament of Com-pan-ions*

When we visited our son and daughter-in-law in Spain, we learned the joy of having *coffee con leche* every morning for breakfast. Com-*pan*-ions are *those with whom we*

Jesus shared bread with many folks in all kinds of places during his years of ministry. Zacchaeus to come down out of a tree so Jesus could go home with him, a tax collector insisted on feeding the 5,000, even though his disciples begged him to send them away. He ate often with Mary and Martha and Lazarus at their home. He ate with publicans and shared the Passover with his disciples on the night he was betrayed. After the resurrection, two disciples who were walking on the road to Emmaus and they invited him in to share. There, at table, their eyes were opened as Jesus blessed and broke the bread. Jesus ate breakfast on the shore for his disciples before the ascension.

Throughout Scripture, God comes to persons in ways that they are able to hear as they are sharing bread. Three messengers brought God's promise to Abraham and Sarah as they ate unleavened bread. Unleavened bread was prepared quickly so that the Hebrews would be ready for Moses to lead them to the Red Sea toward freedom. When those escaped slaves from Egypt were mumbling in the wilderness, God sent manna from heaven to meet their needs. When Elijah asked for bread, he promised her meager supply of meal and oil would not be exhausted, for God

When com-*pan*-ions share bread and open themselves to the presence of God, community—the Body of Christ, for Christians—is that place where we find food for the face and challenge injustice in the world. “The bread we break, the lives we share, become participation in God’s love and care. . . . Our love, freely given and received, nourishes us into sacramental living in our everyday activities.”<sup>13</sup>

Claiming the Christian community as our home is not always easy. Home is the place that requires us to speak the truth in love. It calls us to love even when we are in deep disagreement. It is the ‘course’ when it would be so much easier to bail out and find a new place to be with people we think.

Deep friendship is by its very nature sacramental. Friends need and want to share their lives. But the breaking of bread is also a metaphor for all the ways we share our lives. It implies stories—be they joyous or funny, painful or sad, even when they don't make us “look good.” It means honoring the common values and commitments we are willing to die or live for.

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<sup>13</sup> Vogel and Vogel, *Sacramental Living*, p. 95.

recognize the differences that cannot be resolved and keeps us humble because we know that our companions on the way together is even more important than what divides us.

When we dare to engage in this kind of companionship, we are often surprised by how it keeps us from taking ourselves too seriously or from believing that God's way cannot possibly make it happen. It is this kind of companionship—this sacramental living—which “doubt divides our grief.”

### *Liturgy: Sacraments as life-transforming rituals*

Human beings are, by nature, ritualizing beings. It is no surprise that Jews have celebrated the Passover for almost four thousand years and that Christians around the world for centuries engage in coming to the Table to celebrate Eucharist. Ritual calls us to embody and have the power to transform lives. As Tom Driver says, “to lose ritual is to lose the way.”

In an article with far-reaching implications, Nathan Mitchell says that ritual is “beyond him, the emphasis is not on symbols that require decoding and interpretation, but on “a way of life acquired.”<sup>15</sup> Sometimes we pay so much attention to sacramental symbols as ways of life that we lose sight of the life-transforming power of rituals. The two of us have found that the meaning can contribute significantly to life transformation. Mitchell is right, however, in that if we only “decode” the meaning of sacrament, we do not experience the “bodily inscription” that enables us to acquire abilities for transformative living. In ritual, participation is more than understanding.

In rite, Mitchell notes, the body is taught “to develop *spiritual virtues* by *material* actions. For Christians, baptism and Eucharist are sacraments that tell us who and Whose we are and challenge us to live faithfully as disciples of Jesus Christ. When we experience the baptism in the font, we are marked as members of the Body of Christ. When we come to the Table and eat the bread and drink from the cup, we find food for the journey and grace sufficient for what lies ahead.

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<sup>14</sup> Tom F. Driver, *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Nathan Mitchell, “Liturgical Theology: Ritual as Reading” in *Source and Summit: Commemorating Josef A. Jungmann, S.J.*, Doanne M. Pierce and Michael Downey, eds. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999, p. 179. Note that Mitchell appropriates the contention of Talal Asad that the body is “an assemblage of embodied aptitudes, not . . . a medium of symbolic meanings.” (quoted in Mitchell, p. 179).

<sup>16</sup> Nathan Mitchell, “Liturgical Theology: Ritual as Reading”, p. 179.

As the faith community gathers, our companions of the Way join with us in hearing the stories of the Gospel. Together we take and eat so that we can go into the world to share the News of God's compassion and justice for all. As we make these stories our own, we ask the hard questions as we continually seek truth and justice in a hurting and hurtful world. As she asserts, "the highest level of meaning is participation."<sup>17</sup> All this is part of living the sacred.

At Claremont United Methodist Church in California, where we worship, the loaf of bread on the table and the loaf of bread on our family table look much the same. That was not true when we experienced "communion bread" as little cubes of white bread. Nor is it true when we use those who use a small wafer. The connection between the ordinary things of life (our "bread") and the Eucharistic "bread" required decoding, so that we would recognize the connection.

When the eucharistic bread looks, tastes, and smells like the daily bread we eat, the decoding is lessened. To embody that connection between ordinary experience and sacred *bread* has been sacramental for us. That enables us to be more involved with acquiring the sacred sacramentally. The very act of breaking bread and sharing the cup with our brothers and sisters and forms our way of living.

Once we leave font and Table, Christians are called to let God's light and truth shine in our ordinary, everyday places and experiences of life so that in all our living we are able to see God. We are called to "journey with the assurance that God loves and cares and walks with us in our God's 'household of freedom'."<sup>18</sup> This journey is toward and into God's kin-dom.

### *Sacramental Living: A Matrix of Mystery*

Returning to Dwight's experience of his grandfather's death we discover that all the mystery is part of a matrix of mystery---not mystery in the sense of being baffled, or of that which is hidden by the initiated and is hidden from everyone else. Rather, this mystery involves us in life's mysteries which are beyond our senses and the capacity to fully articulate or conceptualize. Yet the mystery's significance reverberates through our whole being, transforming us by God's grace through the Holy Spirit into persons marked with the sign of Christ's cross, not only on our forehead but in our living.

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<sup>17</sup> Gail Ramshaw, "The Valley of Dry Bones," Unpublished Vice Presidential Address, North American Academy of Liturgy, Tampa, FL, January, 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Linda J. Vogel, *Rituals for Resurrection: Celebrating Life and Death*, Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1996, p. 85.

We start with the ordinary experience of baking bread. It is *embodied* experience ingredients, kneading the dough, “punching it down” so that it can rise again. All this is done and without great significance. When we learn to see, however, we find ourselves in the sacrament of the ordinary. The loaf of bread we bake or buy does not stand alone. It is that loaf of bread in the oven when Dwight’s grandpa was killed, with the loaf of bread with the loaves of bread at family dinners, and even with the solitary experience of eating alone.

What was a personal experience for Dwight became a family story and a story that others who hear it into an experience with the Holy. Whether or not we always bring it to consciousness, it is always the story of that tragic day out on the farm lurking in and around other particular experiences. Telling the story enables us to enter the experience once again, to embody it through thought and teeth and tongue. It is not just something which happened in the past; it is part of who we are and now, part of who we are becoming. In re-membering, the sacrament of story puts its dynamics beyond that story and enables us to enter through its doorway into sacred reality. In this story was shared, Linda and others who have heard of this powerful experience may enter through this doorway to sacred reality.

No one does this by themselves. Each one of us is a part of a community: the family that shared Dwight that day on the farm, the two of us sharing the story, the sacrament of communion. We have broken bread in so many times and places. All of these are part of the matrix through which we enter.

What undergirds the sacramental appropriation inherent in this experience for us is the Church.<sup>19</sup> Without the sign-acts of the Sacraments, much of the life-transforming significance would go unrecognized. The very words used to describe the experience (“broken body,” “death”) come to us through the repeated experience of the Eucharist. If in the Eucharist the body and shed blood of Christ are placed within the context of thanksgiving, is it possible for us to have the experience of our own pain and loss? Can we who lift up the cup of salvation and of thanksgiving to the Lord, give thanks, not for the pain of suffering and death, but rather for the assurance of God’s presence through it all and for the hope given us in Jesus the Christ? In our experience, we say, “by God’s grace!”

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<sup>19</sup> Note Joyce Ann Zimmerman’s analysis: “The deep, dynamic structure of liturgy is identical to the deep, dynamic structure of Christian living.” See her *Liturgy as Living Faith: A Liturgical Spirituality* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1993), p. viii. Note also chapter nine on “Liturgical Spirituality.”

In this matrix of mystery, the dynamics are reciprocal. For in the Eucharist, the broken and shed blood of Christ do not stand alone. While the saving significance of Christ's death resonates with broken bodies and shed blood through history and around the world, as we experience it. So Pierre Teilhard de Chardin could write:

"Over every living thing which is to spring up, to grow, to flower, to ripen during the words: This is my Body. And over every death-force which waits in readiness to wither, to cut down, speak again your commanding words . . . This is my blood."<sup>20</sup> Sacramental living is a spirituality in which our awareness of that which is beyond the immediately obvious nourishes our being, our thinking, and our doing. Thinking, being, and doing are parts of our existence but rather are bound together in the matrix of mystery which relates us to our com-pan-ions on our way and with God.

Sacramental spirituality has to do with our whole *being-in-community* and our *living*. So doing, we reflect "the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hidden treasure" (Colossians 2:27b)

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<sup>20</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 23