

Date: June 1, 2025

Texts: Deut. 6. 1-6 / Luke 4. 14-21

Title: "Sacramental Prayer"

Intro -

Incarnational...

a word we typically break out around Christmas -

(not inappropriately, mind you...)

draws our attention to God taking on human flesh...

becoming "incarnate" - born as a baby...

adopting a concrete form...

i.e. - there is value in "visible realities"

in pretty much any arena, but particularly in matters of faith

(because faith seems to speak of more ethereal realities...)

but Jesus' birth...

bread and wine in the sacrament...

these speak to what we might call "our need for the tangible..."

for patterns... for rituals... for "means of grace" that come

in physical form...

that are "sacramental" - holy...

and concrete

cf. - some helpful perspective -

there is a difference in the way the Hebrews (of the OT) and

the Greeks (of the NT, and - pretty much our current world...)

viewed things...

thought about and saw the world

the Hebrews were concrete thinkers:

God is a mighty fortress...

the Lord is my shepherd...

while the Greeks - more propositional:

- God is mighty... eternal.... - God is caring...

cf. - both are true, but...

the physical image of fortress... of shepherd...

connects... has power...

so...

how does this flow into... translate to...

prayer?

I) Liturgy

relate re: the Bible as a whole -

full of rituals... liturgies... ceremonies of all kinds

full of images and metaphors...

full of that which helps us connect - more completely -

in spirit, and - in body

with how God designed us to live

Foster would have us consider the value of "liturgy" in this -

of the structure that is offered, and -

that can actually serve to free us in our prayer...

in our worship... in our lives

(which is not always the first thought that comes to mind when

we think: structure... rituals...)

the value that Foster suggests is found in this:

liturgical prayer can help us articulate what we otherwise might

struggle with - in terms of "finding the right words..."

it can "prime the pump" when we don't feel like praying...

it can connect us with the larger family of the faith

as we join in with prayers that have brought people together

over generations

cf. - per our Prayer of Confession -

a liturgical / sacramental offering that we would likely not come up with

on our own, but - which speaks to a universal condition, and -

a universal need...

i.e. - prayer - while it can be deeply personal and individual...
is also part of a larger undertaking that binds us together
with all the saints...

in this type of prayer...

we guard against the temptation to be “super spiritual” or
entertaining...

we guard against seeing our faith as a purely private experience...

we are ushered into a deeper understanding of God as
being “wholly other”

per Foster: “the stateliness and formality of the liturgy help us
realize that we are in the presence of *real* Royalty...”

but wait a moment, you may say...

isn't this just praying someone else's thoughts...?

isn't this just “going through the motions” ? And -
someone else's motions at that...?

isn't this just rote repetition...?

cf. - wrongly embraced - yes...

but when seen from the perspective of a freedom that is found
in structure -

in much the same way as a guardrail on a mountain road
gives me the freedom to not worry (overly much...)
about driving over the edge, and let's me enjoy the ride...

in much the same way as a fenced in backyard gives me the freedom to
to let the dog run free, and not worry about her getting out
into traffic...

cf. - I took a course focusing on Jonathan Edwards - the American Revivalist
preacher, teacher, and theologian of the mid 1700's

- he notes that God is a God of means...

i.e. - God provides “means of grace” to help us take root...

to help us grow... to help us thrive

liturgies... rituals... shared prayers... and more -

all this can be seen as a gift of God to ground us more completely
in his over-riding gift of grace

II) Eucharist

and at the heart of it all - appropriate that we touch on this today. -
is the celebration of the Eucharist...

to join together in Holy Communion

cf. - nearly every aspect of prayer is caught up in the sacrament -
examination... repentance... petition... forgiveness...
contemplation... thanksgiving... celebration... and more.

we participate fully in all this, but -

we experience the grace wholly as a gift from God

it is a concrete expression of what is central to our faith:

this is my body... given for you (Christ's sacrifice on the cross...)

this my blood... shed for you (the price paid - on our behalf -
for the remediation of our sins...)

and - as with liturgical prayers -

it "frees us" to connect with God in ways that defy explanation

i.e. - the command is to "take and eat..."

not - "take, and understand..."

which is not to say it is meaningless...

but rather -

it is a means of grace...

that draws us back to Christ's sacrifice for us, and -

our response of grateful obedience

a response that is borne out of humility -

recognizing that I come to the table:

"Just as I am, without one plea...

But that thy blood, was shed for me..."

it makes no difference how we come...

the spotlight is off us...

our performance has no bearing...
rather - we come with empty hands as well as open hands
and what happens at the table...
our connection with Christ...
is all of grace...
but - is something we can touch and feel...
something which can fill us, because...
it is something we can hold...
something that has its own intrinsic power
and meaning

cf. - per another way of seeing this - per Paul Rack:

“On my book shelf I have, in a clear plastic square box, a dirty baseball.
On the baseball appears a date scrawled in ballpoint pen: “4/26/08.”
On that date, my son, playing for his High School team, hit that ball
for his first home-run.
I saw this happen; the game took place in Perth Amboy. He gave me the ball.

Thus this particular baseball, otherwise no different from millions of
other baseballs, became unique in its connection to a particular event
on a particular date at a particular place.
It is not the same as an ordinary baseball. And the fact that my son died
thirteen years later, makes this particular ball
even more significant to me...

This mythic power of the particular flows through the sport of baseball.
At every MLB game, a person called an “authenticator” sits in the front row.
Whenever something happens of any significance, the authenticator takes
the object — usually a ball or a bat — and marks it, setting it aside,
distinguishing it from every other similar object.

Thus we can verify that this particular ball was a player's first major league hit,
or hundredth home-run, or unassisted triple play.

The Church has from the beginning found the power and significance in
particular objects and sites connecting us to Jesus and his followers...

[The sacrament takes us back to that time... to that place... to that meal
that was shared, and - that was given a meaning that far surpasses
the significance of the food that was shared...
and - each time we share it - we "authenticate it" as we take
into ourselves - the sacrament...]

cf. - We have a faith rooted in the [sacramental...] in the Incarnation...
It keeps us from dissolving into a gnostic fog where everything is
neutral and meaningless, a blank slate onto which
the Empire might impose its preferred meaning by force.
God does not remain a mere amorphous idea;
God literally becomes flesh and dwells among us (John 1:14)
in Jesus Christ. ..."

cf. - this is something we can hold onto...
this is something that will never change...
this is a lasting gift of God...
this is sacramental prayer -

may we enjoy it...
as we make it more fully our own.