



FIRST PREZ HONOLULU
SERMON TEXT

“The Sacraments”
by Timmy Fearer
Sunday, March 3, 2024

Acts 2

³⁸ *And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

⁴¹ *So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.*

Matthew 28

¹⁹ *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,* ²⁰ *teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.”*

1 Corinthians 11

²³ *For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread,* ²⁴ *and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”* ²⁵ *In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”* ²⁶ *For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

This reading is about the Lord's Supper and baptism. The Lord's Supper is also called communion, also known as the Eucharist, literally “good gift,” meaning “thanksgiving” in the Greek language.

Last week, we finished with Jesus' words of Beatitudes, his words of blessing, and next week, we're into the Sermon on the Mount. But this morning, we have a stand-alone message about these two things.

Our question this morning is: what is it about these two things – baptism and the Lord's Supper – that they have become so central to our following Jesus and to our worshiping of God Almighty? Why is our life and our worship so marked by these things?

As I was getting ready this week for the message, I was thinking about the fact that every member of the United States military makes an oath of allegiance. Many of you know that having taken that oath yourselves. This is the oath: “I (name) do solemnly swear or affirm that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same. [In other words, “I'm going to live my life according to the Constitution of the United States.] I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice.” Then, in conclusion, you can say “so help me God,” although that is optional, but many say that.

Now, we in the United States did not invent soldiers taking oaths. 2,000 years ago, Roman soldiers made their oath of allegiance as well, not

to the Constitution, not to a president, but to the caesar at the time, beginning with Caesar Augustus in the first century, right around the time of Jesus. We don't have the exact wording of the oath, but a fellow by the name of Vegetius in the fourth century described it. He wrote, "But the soldiers swear that they shall faithfully execute all that the Emperor commands, that they shall never desert the service, and that they shall not seek to avoid death for the Roman republic!" That was their oath of allegiance. That oath was called a *sacramentum*. That's Latin and the English rendering of that is "sacrament."

In Christianity, baptism and the Lord's Supper are called sacraments. We're calling them sacraments – the sacrament of baptism, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Are you telling me that these are a Christian's oath of allegiance to Almighty God? No, actually, we're not saying that. We will get back to that.

In the meantime, let me say that some Christians may think that these sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are things that we do for God, but in a Presbyterian Church, along with many other Protestant Christians, we don't think that way. These are not things that we do for God. St. Augustine, who was a Roman citizen and a great Christian back in the fourth century, said this: a Christian sacrament – baptism and the Lord's Supper – is a visible sign of an invisible grace. A sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible grace.

Signs are visible things, right? And they point to things that, at the moment, may be invisible but nevertheless real. For example, driving here: "Kaneohe – 10 miles ahead," "¾ of a mile – Pali Highway," "Waikiki – next exit." These are visible

signs pointing to something that is very real but, for the moment, is invisible to you. If I make this sign to you [hands in a heart shape], what am I saying? I love you. This is a visible sign that is expressing an invisible reality. If I send a text message to you and put an emoji on it, that emoji is a visible sign that is sending a message about an invisible reality. It's something that's very real, but you can't see it.

The invisible thing that a sacrament points to is called a grace, which is a gift. *Karis* is the Greek word. We get our words charity and charitable from that. We get our words charisma and charismatic from that. It's a gift. You may remember several weeks ago, Jenny in her message said, "Mercy is not getting what you do deserve. On the other hand, grace is getting what you don't deserve." Something that's undeserved, that is what a gift is. That's what you get when you get grace.

So, we're saying that sacraments, that is, baptism and the Lord's Supper, are visible signs. They are pointing to invisible but very real gifts, things that you get which you don't deserve, you don't earn, you don't merit. You just get them. And you get them from God because he gives them to you. And those invisible grace things that he gives are forgiveness and cleansing, restoration and new life. That's what baptism is all about and points to when God does those things and gives those things to you.

Then, on the other hand, inclusion, adoption into the family, and a place at the table – literally, that's what the Lord's Supper is all about and points to – God does and gives that to you. Visible signs pointing to invisible things, invisible graces that

God does and gives, which we then receive. That's our part in the game. We're just recipients.

Now don't miss this: even the signs themselves – baptism and the Lord's Supper – are not things that we are doing for God. Even the signs themselves are things that God does for us. They are themselves gifts which God gives to his people.

Back to oaths of allegiance. The Sacrament of baptism and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper are not oaths of allegiance that we make to God. They are oaths of allegiance that God makes to us. They are God's sacraments to you. "I, Maker of heaven and earth, commit myself to you. I, the God and Father of your Lord Jesus Christ, give myself. I pledge my allegiance to you. I choose you." Sacrifices are things that we do for God and they go up from the people to God, as it were. Sacraments are things that God does for the people and they come down and are showered upon the people, upon you and me. Sacrifices go up. Sacraments come down.

Think about it this way: think of a house. Can you picture a house in your mind? You did not build that house. You did not decide which family, it's constitution, who the members are. You didn't decide what family would dwell in that house. You did not invite yourself to be adopted into the family living in that house. It's all grace, undeserved gift.

Baptism is the front door to the house. It's the public entrance into the family, into the house with the family living in it, for all to see. And once you're in, you're in. The Lord's Supper, on the other hand, is the regular family meal gathered around the dining room table, Jesus presiding. It's his table and he's saying, every time you sit at that table, every

time you partake, "You're still in. You've had a tough week, come sit down and get something to eat." Baptism is the front door to the house, the Lord's Supper is the regular family meal of the house – God's oaths of allegiance to you and to me.

Back to the sacraments as signs. Are these things just signs – baptism and the Lord's Supper? Are they just visual reminders of spiritual transactions, spiritual realities, just pointers to the things that God gives us and he does for us and keeps on giving and doing? Well, they certainly are that, but maybe they're more than just that.

I was at a semi-deserted Catholic retreat center once many years ago. I was on retreat myself. I just needed a place to go and have some time with God. It was midweek. That's why barely anybody was there. The dining hall was almost empty and I took my dinner and sat down at a table across from a guy sitting by himself, wearing what looked to me like a monk's robe. He was not a monk. He was a Capuchin Friar, that is, a Capuchin brother. The cabochons – maybe you know – are a Catholic order following St. Francis of Assisi, taking a vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience. A cappuccino coffee gets its name from them because its color resembles the color of the robes the capuchins wear. This guy was African American, late middle age. He had been a high-level banker in San Francisco. His wife had died and, with the blessing of his adult daughter, he had decided to become a Capuchin.

So, we started talking about the Lord's Supper over dinner. I said, "You know, you all think that, with the words of the priest said over the elements, that the bread and the wine are transformed into and actually become the body and the blood of Jesus,

don't you?" He said, "That's right." I said, "How did you come to that?" He said, "Well, when Jesus said 'This is my body, and this is my blood,' we take him seriously. He met literally. We take him seriously too, at his words, but we don't take him literally. We take him symbolically.

But maybe this is more than just a visual aid, a symbol that prompts our memory of what God has done. Maybe the Lord's Supper, for example, is more like how we regard Mary, the mother of Jesus. Stick with me with this. We believe that our Catholic friends make too much out of Mary and the sacraments, we would say. For example, Mary – perpetual virginity before, during, and after the birth of Jesus, for the rest of her life. Our Catholic friends say yes to that. We say no to that. Jesus had brothers and sisters. Mary – to be prayed to, along with some of the other Saints. Our Catholic friends say yes to that. We say no to that. Mary – the greatest disciple who ever lived, to be venerated and lifted up. Our Catholic friends say yes to that. But we rarely talk about her except at Christmas and maybe on Good Friday. We're still in reaction against Catholic excess, but we need to make more of her than we do. She was the greatest disciple who ever lived. And maybe we need to make more of the sacraments than we do.

Actually, as good Presbyterians, we do make more of these things, especially the Lord's Supper. If you believe that the supper is simply a reminder, a memory prompt to get you ready to engage with God during the worship service, you're being a good Christian. You're being a good Presbyterian. And if you also believe that something more is happening in the supper, that when we partake of the elements, there's a moment of spiritual communion, spiritual intimacy with Christ, that the

Holy Spirit really likes this moment, he likes to use this moment to speak to us, to heal some of us, to do ministry – if you believe that, you're also being a good Christian and a good Presbyterian. We hold both views in the Presbyterian Church. One is called the memorial view, that it's basically a visual prompt, a reminder. But we also hold the view of what's called real presence, that the Holy Spirit brings us into a special communion with the Crucified One when we sit at his table. We believe both things in this church and you can fall in either camp. We are all together.

Another question: do I have to receive baptism and the Lord's Supper in order to be included in the family of God? Am I going to get to heaven if I didn't do either one in my life? Our Catholic friends would say you have to do these things. And they have some other things they call sacraments, as well. But we would say no you don't, because baptism and the Supper are visible signs that point to what God has already and continues to do for you, not dependent on your participation in the sign. But let me say this: if you neglect participating in these things, if you neglect submitting to baptism and participating in the Supper, you do miss out on something. Not to mention the fact that Jesus commanded us to do these things.

This is for those who are watching online right now in particular. Some of you are housebound. You really would love to be here and you can't. And we miss you. You grieve not being here. We grieve with you. Some of you at home are not housebound. You are staying home by choice. You may have some very good reasons to stay home, but some of you are staying home out of convenience. And we miss your presence very

much. Some of you are thinking that you're getting all there is to get and you can just stay at home and watch. But you're separate from us. You're physically absent. I would say, if a worship service was just about getting things, you would be kind of right. We do receive things in a worship service, but worship services are principally about what you bring and what you give, not about what you get. And, as one of your shepherds, I would just say to you who are online, some of you have very legitimate and real reasons to stay home, and we bless you and support you in that. For some of you, it's just a matter of convenience. You are not only depriving the body gathered here of the gift of your presence and how God wants to use you with the church that's gathered, but also you are not going to get all that you could because you are going to miss out on the unseen mystery of what's happening in this meal when we participate together. That's not a reprimand. It's an invitation to think again.

Here's another question: do we baptize infants and children in this church? Yes, we do. And that's an answer to the question "Where do our kids stand with us?" Where do our beloved children stand in relation to the people of God before they make an adult decision for or against Jesus Christ, junior high being the universally recognized age of adult accountability down through the centuries, across the globe? Until that point, are our children loved and counted with us or are they loved but counted as outsiders, as spiritual aliens among us. Infant baptism says to children, "You are counted among the covenant people of God with all the rights and the privileges of those people, your family, until the time you make your own decision about Jesus, which you will need to make, either for or against the good news." Traditionally, at that moment – age

11, 12, 13, right around that time – if you lean into Jesus, that would be publicly recognized not with a rebaptism, but with your taking the Lord's supper for the very first time. That would be called confirmation – confirming your baptism. This table is for baptized believers. So that's infant baptism. You get into that by going through the front door, right? You get to the table that way.

Infant dedication, which our Baptist friends and so many nondenominational, independent churches practice, says our children, while dearly beloved, are not of us. They're outsiders until they decide to become insiders, to be baptized as adults making that decision in what is called believers baptism.

Infant baptism is a sacrament of grace, believing in grace giving us something that God does. Infant dedication is really more like a sacrifice. "God, we give you this child. It's something that we're doing. We're counting on, we're hoping for, we're praying for grace from you upon this child of ours. We baptize infants believing that there were many households, for example, in the first century, that were entirely baptized as with the three examples in the New Testament, with the adults making the decision for the children.

But that kind of rubs us wrong as Americans, doesn't it? That challenges our individualism as Americans. No one tells us what to do. I mean, this summer at the Paris Olympics, in the opening ceremonies, all of the countries with their flags and their teams, they're going to be marching around the track in the stadium and as they pass the viewing stand where President Macron and the officials, the government officials of France will be sitting there, every team is going to dip their flag in

honor except for one country. Since 1908, we have not dipped our flag.

I was sitting with a group of students 40 years ago in what was then communist-controlled East Germany, I being a student myself. Our young Communist Party guide was derisively recalling her own baptism as an infant which, as an adult, she now was rejecting and notifying us, she said, "Nobody asked me. They [that is, her parents] just decided for me." And she was really incensed about it. But actually, when you think about it, most of the core things which define us, define who we are, we did not decide. We did not choose. We don't choose to be born. We don't choose the parents we get. We don't choose our siblings. Some of us wish we could. We don't choose the color of our eyes. We don't choose the color of our hair. We don't choose whether we get to keep our hair or not. We don't choose our DNA. We don't choose our identity as male or female. We don't choose where we grow up. We don't choose where we go to school when we're children. We don't choose who our teachers are. We do not choose who is going to love us, who's going to love us no matter what. We don't decide any of that. And somehow, in our pride, we get offended at the idea that God does the choosing. God does the deciding that he's going to love us no matter what, which infant baptism points to. It's a sign pointing to that. Infant baptism, infant dedication, they may well both be inventions of the early church to answer that hard question, "Where do our kids stand with us? Where do they stand with God until they become adults?" We'll just have to ask Jesus personally to clear that up when we see him.

What is clear is that baptism is the front door. The Lord's Supper is the regular family meal. These are

God's oaths of allegiance to you and to me, and they are signs of grace and we need all the grace we can get.

So let's get ready for the family meal. Let me pray for us.

Father, thank you that you're so giving, you're so generous, that it's just not dependent on our fickle selves. It's dependent on your solid character and your unflinching and unfailing love. Meet us, Lord, as we come to the table and get us ready now, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

SPIRITUAL STEPS OF THE WEEK:

1 Think about how God has pledged allegiance to you in baptism and in the Lord's Supper.

2 If you have not been baptized:

- Ask yourself: "What am I waiting for?"
- Pray about it.
- Talk to a pastor or elder about it.