
VISIBLE WORDS

Last week, was what we might call a “sandwich text” for our reading.

- Two passages with the middle part missing, like two pieces of bread, with the lunch meat or peanut butter and jelly just not there.
 - Last week, so many people wanted time with JESUS that HE took the disciples and went off with them.
 - But the crowds found them. So, JESUS taught them.
 - Then we skipped to where JESUS’ group got into a boat and went to the other side where more people recognized JESUS and brought the sick to HIM.
 - Yet missing from the middle was “the meat,” the important passage we heard today.
- But today’s reading is not from Mark; it is from John because John’s version of this story is richer and more detailed.
 - In fact, we will spend today and the next four weeks in this sixth chapter of John.
- And I think that’s good because this chapter is filled with significance to help our understanding of the sacraments
- I hope that during the next few weeks, we will come to connect Sunday worship and the sacraments to daily life more deeply.

Let’s begin by considering the crowds following JESUS.

- They must have been disappointed and confused at first at HIS sudden departure from them.
 - Disappointed because they had hoped to see a miracle, only to be abandoned by this young prophet.
 - Confused because they could not understand why JESUS would leave them in response to their adulation as HE did last week.

Disappointment, confusion, and misunderstanding.

- How clearly do these three words reflect our sense of Communion and the Sacraments?
- Do we truly comprehend the theological and existential significance of pouring water over a child’s head, or gathering in front of the altar, the Table of the LORD?

And is there really any wonder if we don’t understand?

- Debate about the meaning of the sacraments rages within the Church, between different traditions, and within those traditions.

Recently American Roman Catholic bishops wanted to withhold Holy Communion from Catholic politicians who don’t follow church policy in their public statements.

- But isn’t this the LORD’s gift to us and not something to be earned by toeing the company line?

The Sacraments hold such an important place that they are both central to our life of faith, yet can also be very confusing.

- So, I want to suggest that we think of them as “visible words,” because Baptism and Communion are the visible, physical counterpoint to the preaching and teaching of the church.
- They embody the proclaimed and heard Gospel in physical form, the Gospel seen, touched, and tasted in the water, bread, and wine.
- They are physical, visible reminders of what we have heard and believe, simply because we are physical creatures, and remembering and believing can be so hard.
 - So, we first have the Gospel preached to us so that we may hear it, and second, the same Gospel given to us so that we may taste, touch, and feel it with our mouths, hands, and bodies.

Visible, physical words for visible, physical people.

- Now, if this is true, then the sacraments share the same character as the proclaimed Gospel.
- That is, the sacramental word, like the preached word, will be primarily about one thing: telling the truth.
 - And, perhaps this is where our difficulty and confusion begin because to do this—telling the unflinching, honest-to-goodness truth—is rarely easy, and seldom welcome.

Frederick Buechner, in his book Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale, describes why telling the truth can be so hard:

- Because before the Gospel is good news, he writes, it is *just plain news*. *Let us say that it is the evening news, the television news, but with the sound turned off. Picture that, then, the video without the audio, the news with, for a moment, no words to explain it or explain it away, no words to cushion or sharpen the shock of it, no definition given to dispose of it with such as a fire, a battle, a strike, a treaty, a beauty, an accident. Just the thing itself, life itself, or as much of it as the screen can hold, flickering away in the dark of the room.*

News describing the way things are.

- And from such news, Buechner goes on to explain, there is no escape, as we are confronted with who we really are, forced to look honestly at ourselves with no illusions, excuses, or hiding places.
 - But then GOD overlays the Gospel on our lives and gives meaning and hope to what we otherwise might take for granted.

This is the Gospel; this is the sacraments; the telling of the truth.

- And, as Buechner also writes, such truth is *bad news before it is good news*. *It is the news that man is a sinner, to use the old word, that he is evil in the imagination of his heart... That is the tragedy.*
 - *But it is also the news that he is loved anyway, cherished, forgiven, bleeding, to be sure, but also bled for. That is the comedy, the good news.*

This is the truth that we need to hear—this news, tragedy before it is comedy, bad before it is good, law before it is gospel.

- It is not what we want to hear, really, but it is there all the same.
- The sacraments tell us first, the difficult truth about ourselves and our sinfulness, and only then the glorious truth about GOD's loving response to us and abiding concern for us.

And of all the truths the sacraments tell us about ourselves, the first is that we are not in control.

- But we know this and don't need to be told.
- After all, any illness, job loss, tragedy great or small, or pandemic reminds us how precarious life is.
 - And yet...and yet it is tempting for us to believe otherwise, and try to arrange our lives just so, and in this way delude ourselves into believing that we really can be masters of our own destiny.
 - So, the Gospel first reveals the difficult news that we are not in control.

This is what Mark's Gospel last week and John's Gospel today tell us.

- As the people witnessed JESUS' miracle, they saw in HIM their salvation, but from political tyranny, and they wanted more of HIS miraculous power, healing, and nourishment.
- These were not foolish people, but faithful people, who when they saw the mighty deeds of JESUS, recognized HIM to be from GOD,
 - but for them, this meant HE would save them from Rome and restore Israel to its glory.

- And it is at this point that JESUS withdrew, for HE would not be a king on their terms...or on anyone else's.
 - CHRIST's words to these faithful people were harsh:
 - "No," to all their ambitions and delusions of power and control.
 - They had no say in who HE would be.
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And here's the thing: JESUS says the same thing to us.

- This is one of the important reasons we baptize infants because they simply have no say in the matter of their baptism.
- GOD, through their parents, and the church, just chooses them.
 - GOD chooses to make us GOD's own, to love and cherish us no matter what our attitude may be toward GOD or the Church in the future.
 - GOD just goes ahead and chooses us to receive the new life of CHRIST in Holy Baptism.

And Holy Communion is of exactly the same character, for when we come to the Table of the LORD, we come on GOD's terms, not ours.

- CHRIST comes to us in Holy Communion, bodily, physically, visibly, first to say, "No," to our desire to be in control and have GOD be who we decide GOD should be,
 - but then to say, "Yes," to the persons we actually and already are—the persons for whom CHRIST died and to whom HE now gives the gift of HIS Body and Blood.

At the altar, you see, all pretense of who we are must give way, for when we gather around this Table with our hands out and our mouths open, we are as naked and needy, helpless and powerless as a baby about to be baptized.

- And yet, it is precisely to these helpless and uncomprehending persons—all of us—that CHRIST comes, and from whom CHRIST will never draw away.

And what is so difficult about Baptism and Communion is, in the end, very simple: we had and have nothing to do with it.

- It is GOD's action of mercy and grace alone,
 - and thus, we can never take credit for it nor control it.
 - But this is also what is so important about the Sacraments: because they are *GOD's* work and not our own, we can trust them.
 - For when all else fails—our relationships, our sources of security, our health, or even life itself—when we fail—GOD's promise yet stands firm.
 - GOD's word to us in Baptism and Communion remains faithful, calling us ever back to who we really are in GOD's eyes—GOD's beloved and holy children, forgiven and without guilt.
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Each week, GOD invites us to come, just as ourselves.

- Not to pretend or put on a good face, or hold honesty and vulnerability at arm's length, lest we drown in the fear of rejection.
- Each week GOD invites us to come to the LORD's Table in the same way a baby comes to the font, holding back nothing and risking all,
 - for it is the LORD HIMSELF who invites us to share HIS meal,
 - the LORD HIMSELF who nourishes us with HIS own Body,
 - the LORD HIMSELF who calls you to new life and hope, now and forever.
- We are invited to come as we are, broken, but loved by the ONE who was broken for us—JESUS CHRIST our LORD.