

Bright Light Living

Moving Upward through *Sacramental Prayer*
Part 4 of the Sermon Series *Perspectives on Prayer*

Genesis 1:1-3; Colossians 1:9-14

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June 3, 2007

“Church is a good place for ...” The unprepared words paraded out of my mouth as I stood in one of two short lines of people waiting to sign a memorial service guestbook. A few in the line with me were FPC members. Others were friends and family of the fine lady whose life we’d gathered to celebrate in the context of Christ’s resurrection. It was a cultural diverse group and congregational setting. The church building had at least three floors and, praise God, plenty of bathrooms.

The line I was in as we all waited to pen our names and prayerful respects had been shorter than the other. As such, several people in front of me started speaking about how they might be in the “wrong” line. Hearing this triggered the spontaneous utterance that marched out of my mouth behind some invisible majorette. “Church,” I had said, “is a good place for a convergence.” Just then, one of the Baptist preachers of that congregation passed by me and, in a light-humored way, put his hand on my shoulder and replied, “Sounds like you know what you’re talking about!”

Well, now that I’m thinking back on that moment, I can humbly affirm that I know a little something about sacramental prayer. That’s what those words describing that particular experience were to me. They were a prayer. Not an intellectual declaration, despite my dropping the SAT sounding word “convergence.” Not a speech designed to draw attention to myself or stir debate. The Holy Spirit sort of just welled up within me and led the words up from my heart to reveal a spiritual, yet practical truth.

Before I can further define with you what sacramental prayer is, we do need to pause on that word “convergence.” It’s just a wonderfully descriptive word because it means a coming together of two or more things. Two rivers, for instance, may converge at a particular point in town. Understood in this way, at the memorial service two lines of people converged at the point of the registry. The passing of the pen from one to the other symbolized the point of coming together.

There is a little bit more of an abstract aspect of convergence as well. It can be, to offer a straight dictionary definition, “the approach of an infinite series to a finite limit.” So picture a crystal clear night full of what seems like a thousand billion twinkling stars. Then suddenly you notice the Big Dipper. There is a convergence in our sight of something seemingly infinite and something that has a defined, sensible structure. Understood in this more abstract way, at the memorial service two easily counted groups of Christians, two finite sets, converged in one place from the great and seemingly infinite number of Christians across the world and at home in heaven.

Sacramental prayer, as I’ve come to understand it and encourage you to understand it, is, then, *prayer that sees and experiences a convergence, a coming together, of things that happen in this world with God’s eternal and gracious presence.* It is a coming together of the sacred and the secular, of the infinite and the identifiable. A sacrament, by one classic definition, is just this – it is an outward, physical sign of an inward, spiritual grace.

When the memorial book pen was passed between strangers and friends for the purpose of paying faithful respects at a service designed to celebrate the life of a child of God and servant of Jesus Christ, it was a sacramental moment. It was not an official church sacrament, mind you, but it was nonetheless sacramental because it symbolized a coming together in God’s house, which is both a physical place as well as a spiritual

one. And it was a coming together of Christians, who have both physical bodies as well as spiritual ones.

The celebration of baptism is an even clearer example of sacramental prayer. It's not just something we *do*, a ritual we execute because it's something *the Church does* and parents feel obligated to have *done*. It's a prayerful act, one that embodies God Almighty reaching down with a blessing and adopting us forever. The Word of God is both spoken from the Bible and from pages in a prayer book and it is enlivened by the Spirit to be something deeply and spiritually relevant to us. The water flows from two rivers ... the physical, refreshing, cleansing stuff that sprung up and out from some source here on earth, and the really refreshing, soul scrubbing river of life that flows from heaven. All rivers run too and fro, and so what another saint once said holds true – "Baptism point back to the work of God, and forward to the life of faith." (J. Alice Motyer)

One of the things I love about water as a sacramental image, as in image that can teach us about sacred and secular convergence, is how inspirational it looks when light is reflected upon it. It could be water contained in a font or water hemmed in by a lakebed's boundaries ... doesn't matter. There is just something really special and holy about the way light and water, the way something streaming from above and streaming below dance together.

This morning's passage from Colossians makes a remarkable claim. It says that we are "saints in the light." That's a very poetic way of saying that we are believers whose lives are illuminated by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We live faithfully in our Lord's glow, showing us how to see through all darkness through our study of the Bible, our expressions of worship and service, and above all through our love of neighbor. We who have been baptized have this light shimmering upon us, showing the world that we choose to live in our Lord's bright, brilliant light. We are the Sun-dappled ripples of God's holy river. As such, we are strengthened every day in all spiritual wisdom and understanding and empowered to endure everything with patience and joyful gratitude to God our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. This is our witness to the world. This is our daily sacramental prayer. Each of us, whatever our age, is a symbolic convergence of Christ and our communities.

Richard Foster, in his book on prayer, strongly emphasizes the importance of our understanding and living out sacramental prayer. He does so, in part, by telling us about his earlier life experiment with what he calls "religionless Christianity." The experiment as he describes it was one in which he sought to live "in continuous communion with God for three months without any outward 'props' whatever – no Bible, no liturgy, no Eucharist, no worship services, no set times of prayer, nothing." What was the result of this experiment? "God," he writes, "was gracious to me during those ninety days, but far and away the most important thing I learned was how badly I

needed those 'props' to keep me pressing in to the Divine Center ... without this outward structure, my internal yearnings for God simply do not hold together." (Foster, Prayer, pp. 105-106)

In other words, he needed to live a life of faith that was a fusion of spiritual yearning and actual living. Being active in the rituals of the church and in the classic disciplines of Christian spirituality allowed him to live his life sacramentally, aware as much as humanly possible and as often as humanly possible of God's indwelling power and presence.

I see all sorts of sacramental prayer, all sorts of bright light living here at FPC. Most directly, I see it every time we celebrate Baptism and the Lord's Supper. It's here in the preaching and hearing of God's word, in our songs of praise, and in our spoken and unspoken petitions from the heart. It's particularly embodied in the way we govern ourselves through elected and ordained Elders and Deacons who work with so many of you together as one living body of Christ. And next Sunday, at our Festival, I invite you to experience sacramental prayer as I'm dunked repeatedly in the dunk tank, as your child or grandchild's face is being painted, as antique cars are being admired and balloon animals are taking shape, as country tunes and a little late afternoon rock 'n roll are adding rhythm to your day. It will be a sacramental fun-raiser for sure!

Each day, every waking hour, we have this terrific, not-to-be-wasted opportunity to exercise *prayer that sees and experiences a convergence, a coming together, of things that happen in this world with God's eternal and gracious presence*. As I survey this beautiful, historic sanctuary, with all of you modern day worshippers ... I need to wear my sunglasses because I know we are all about bright-light living! If you aren't seeing the same thing, ask God to help you, saying, as a hymn we'll be singing in the 9 o'clock hour next week goes, "Open my eyes, that I may see, glimpses of truth Thou hast for me; place in my hands the wonderful key, that shall unclasp and set me free; silently now I wait for Thee, ready my God, Thy will to see; open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!" Amen.