

August 23, 2020

Isaiah 6:3, Acts 17:28a
Ephesians 4:4-6

In every confirmation class I have ever led at least one class time was devoted to sacraments, always introduced with the question, “How many sacraments do we at Amicable Church recognize?”, followed by the question, “What are they?”

I have learned never to assume that what is obvious to me is obvious to everyone. So, here is the answer to the first question: Two sacraments, as opposed to the seven lifted up by the Roman Catholic Church. The two are: Baptism and Communion or Eucharist.

I then ask the confirmands, “What is a “sacrament?” My answer being: it is a Christian rite, in which, our doctrine tells us, God is present in a special way. God is present in the water of baptism and God is present in the bread and cup of communion – in a special way.

While both of these sacraments are very important to me, especially communion, I am really a Baptist, theologically, when it comes to sacraments. Many years ago I learned that in the Baptist tradition there are no sacraments, there are only ordinances; the things Jesus “ordered” his followers to do: Baptize the world in the name of the Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. And remember Jesus every time you break bread and share a common cup. (Where we, and the Baptists, missed the boat was the other order Jesus gave to his disciples: wash one another’s feet, be servant to one another, and the world. But I digress.)

Baptists don’t recognize sacraments – a rite in which God is present in a special way, because they believe that either everything in life is sacred or nothing is. In a book I read recently, Religion as We Know It: An Origin Story by Jack Miles, Miles said it was the advent of Christianity that began to break the world into two parts – secular and sacred. Before this, beliefs were just a part of the culture, a part of society. God, or gods, were seen to be acting in the world without borders, if you will. Christianity began to separate good and bad; people who follow God and are rewarded and those that don’t and aren’t; places, people, and actions that are sacred or secular.

This dichotomy has existed for so long (almost 2 millennia) and is such a part of the landscape that we, for the most part, haven’t questioned it. As our understanding of God continues to grow and

evolve, we need to reassess this division of the world into sacred and secular.

For some time now we have been challenging this division in our worship at Amicable Church, perhaps without even recognizing this. Every Sunday we open worship with the call and response “God is present. All the time, everywhere.” If we accept the presence of God in us, around us, everywhere and all the time and if God’s presence makes things “sacred”, then there can be no place that is “secular”, that is, without God.

I chose three brief scripture passages which lend support to belief in the omnipresence of God. In Isaiah’s vision of heaven, the angels sing of the fact that “the whole earth is full of God’s glory.” The Apostle Paul, speaking to the Athenians, describes the God of Jesus Christ as the One in whom “we live and move and have our being.” And, in his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul describes God as the One “who is above all and through all and **in all**.”

If you accept as accurate the reasoning I am laying out here, there are consequences. The greatest consequence to proclaiming everything in life is either sacred or nothing is that **all** our actions are sacred, because everything in life is either sacred or nothing is. This should lead us to ask ourselves: How sacred is my life, the things I do? Do I bring glory and honor to God? The truth is, we have all fallen short of the glory of God, but that does not mean we should not strive to live in the awareness of God’s presence and honor that presence.

How do we do this? For a long time I have understood Sunday morning worship to be a time to practice how we are to live our lives in God’s presence 24-7.

In the sacred-secular, divine-profane dichotomy Sunday morning worship was seen as a way of fulfilling our obligation to bring praise to God. The church building was a holy site; a site to be treated with respect and honor. And, after singing songs of praise and listening to sermons that offer direction and maybe even reprimand for our lives, we could go home to the place where we could swear and do those profane things not allowed in church or other sacred places.

With this in mind let me offer you other ways to understand and better use the elements of worship. In the bulletin you will see that we open worship with a Call to Worship. This is an acknowledging

of God's presence with gratitude and thanksgiving. In those moments of waking up in the morning or feeling down about life you can call yourself to worship by reminding yourself of the beauty of God's creation and the power of God's unconditional love.

In these days we lift up questions for reflection in place of a Prayer of Confession, but both are founded on the same idea. They are offered not as a way to make you feel bad or ashamed of yourself, rather its purpose is to train us to fearlessly face and name the times we have fallen short of God's glory, knowing that we are forgiven, we are blessed by God's love. This requires humility and grace – both by us and those we are willing to face and speak the truth about our lives to. Try it. See if you are not uplifted and comforted and renewed by facing a failing, publicly.

Scripture and sermon are meant to help us see God in the world around us better and help us live into God's loving presence fully. This can happen each and every day. Take time to read the Daily Devotional from our denomination. Listen carefully and care-filled to those speaking around you, even if you disagree with them. Read the newspaper with love and grace, trying to imagine what Jesus would think and say. This is a way to listen for God's Word.

It is easy to see how prayer, especially Centering Prayer, fits into this formula of worship being done 24/7 in our lives. When we remember, lift up in our minds, and are concerned about family and friends and even strangers, this is a form of prayer. God knows what is on our minds. Showing empathy and speaking our concern for the needs of others is one of the many ways we "pray without ceasing."

We live out a worship service's Service of Giving every time we give of our time, talent, and/or wealth to help the world around us. Supporting the church is, of course, one of the ways we worshipfully give. But so is checking in on our neighbor to make sure they are doing okay. Calling someone who lives alone and is probably feeling very isolated. Saying a kind word to the harried clerk at the cash register at the local grocery store. All these things are forms of worship service giving.

I don't want to forget the "ordinances" of worship. Baptism is nothing more, and nothing less, than the welcoming of a stranger into your life. It is the giving of kindness, water, support to a homeless

person you walk by. It is taking time to give clear direction to someone who is lost. It is telling someone who has been rejected by society that they are a child of God and therefore both loved and lovable. This is how we welcome someone into a loving relationship with God. This is baptism.

Communion is my favorite worship element. For me, communion happens every time I sit down at a table with someone, acknowledge God's presence, and give thanks for the food I have been given. While I know that God is present in that moment, whether I acknowledge it or not, my acknowledgement of God's presence, my remembering the life and teachings of Jesus, changes me and the interaction at the table. Communion is what binds us in community.

All through worship we set aside time for music, for singing. Most of us are doing this automatically everyday of our lives. Many people I know have music playing almost non-stop. Every once and while, as you listen to your favorite music and musician, stop for just a second and acknowledge God's presence by saying thank you for the music that moves your spirit. This will change your listening experience.

Finally, we close worship with a Benediction, with a blessing, desiring that the worshipper might know themselves to be held in God's presence and find support whatever comes their way.

Benediction is not the end of worship, but the completion of the circle of worship, which has, really, no beginning or end.

Benediction, this blessing, is what infuses all of our worshipping lives. When you are down, when you are feeling lost and alone, lift up a benediction, remind yourself that you are, indeed, blessed, even when in that moment you are feeling shat upon. Remind yourself that you are a child of God, loved and lovable. Remind yourself that there are things you can give thanks for, even if it is only the fact that you are still breathing. For, you see, benediction is nothing more than gratitude with an attitude of love.

Friends, either everything in life is sacred, or nothing is. I pray you will take the elements of this virtual worship service and bring them into your living every day, 24/7. By doing this you will bring praise and honor to God – all the time and everywhere. Amen.