

Infinite Power Through Common Things

2 Kings 5:1-14

We Lutherans have a pretty good understanding of how we come to be saved.

We are justified by faith, which means that when we believe and trust in the saving work of Jesus Christ on our behalf, God forgives us all our sins and gives us eternal life.

But what do we do with our salvation *after* we're saved?

How do we live our Christian lives in a God-pleasing way?

Of course we know that we should take the Ten Commandments to heart, strive to obey them and repent when we fail.

But how do we deal with temptation?

How do we grow in faith?

How do we learn to love and forgive one another?

How do we deal with suffering?

How do we respond when God says "No" to our prayers?

All these questions have to do with what is called "sanctification" or Christian living.

Most of the questions pastors get from members of their congregations have to do with sanctification.

We tend to think of sanctification in terms of growth and improvement, but the Scriptures describe it more in terms of suffering and dying.

Our sinful flesh—everything in us that prefers what this world has to offer rather than the joy and peace of the kingdom of God—has to die so that the new man who is planted in us at our baptism and who seeks only the things of God can grow and thrive.

As Paul wrote to the members of the church at Rome: “We were buried with [Christ] through baptism into death in order that just as He was raised from the dead...we too may walk in newness of life. [Therefore]...count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

We die to sin and to self so that we can grow in Christ.

Two ways that God helps us as we struggle with this process of “dying in order to live” are by encouraging us through his Word, and by giving us power to persevere through the Sacraments.

The Biblical account of the Exodus, for example, encourages us by providing us with a pattern for our Christian lives.

Just like the Israelites of Moses' time, we are born into slavery, we are baptized into freedom, we are forgiven and nourished by God who leads us through the wilderness of this world, and we are ultimately delivered into the promised land.

In this and in many other places in the Bible God furnishes us with patterns of his enduring love and provision for his people so that we will persevere in our faith that He IS our God—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who delivers His people out of slavery to sin and death into freedom and eternal life.

Today, however, I would like to focus on the power of the sacraments in our Christian lives.

I'd like to begin by considering our Old Testament reading for today—the account of Naaman the Aramean—which we heard read just a few minutes ago.

Naaman had leprosy and had journeyed all the way to Israel from Aram (modern day Syria) to seek out Elisha the prophet in order to be cured of his disease.

As his royal entourage drew near Elisha's house, Elisha sent a messenger to Naaman, telling him to wash seven times in the Jordan River in order to be cleansed of his disease.

Naaman was not pleased by the fact that Elisha had chosen to deal with him through a messenger, and he was disappointed by Elisha's instructions, since he had expected something much more spectacular.

“I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of the leprosy. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?”

Naaman was hoping for an Ernest Angely experience (“HEAL!”) and instead he was told to take a bath.

It was only after some of his servants urged him to follow the prophet's instructions that he consented to go to the Jordan and wash himself, whereupon he was immediately healed.

Naaman's response to Elisha's instructions is a good example of how many Christians regard the sacraments.

They ask, “How can physical things like water and wine and bread deliver divine blessings?”

That question has dogged the church ever since the time of the Reformation, when some Christians began to oppose what they called “sacramentarianism”: the idea that God works through physical means to bestow spiritual blessings.

This resistance arose from two sources.

One was the Reformers' deep aversion to anything that smacked of Roman Catholicism, and the sacraments were regarded as distinctly Catholic.

The other was the growing respect for what later came to be called “empiricism”: the conviction that “seeing was believing” and that reality consisted only of what could be seen and heard and touched.

To this kind of mentality, water was water, bread was bread and wine was wine and nothing else.

To discern God's saving power at work in the waters of Baptism, or Jesus' body and blood coming to us through the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper simply made no sense to them.

If the senses couldn't grasp it, it wasn't happening.

God wouldn't use physical things to deliver spiritual blessings.

What this kind of thinking ignores is the fact that from the very beginning, God has come to his people in physical ways.

Through the physical elements of fire and smoke he led the Israelites through the wilderness.

Through sacrifices of oil and wine and the blood of lambs and goats He forgave the sins of Israel.

Through olive oil he anointed the Kings of Israel with the Holy Spirit.

Using mud made of dust and spit Jesus gave sight to a man who had been blind from birth.

Through the breaking of bread he opened the eyes of the two men he met on the road to Emmaus.

Through the muddy waters of the Jordan River, He cleansed Naaman of his leprosy.

And through the physical body of a man, he saved mankind by shedding physical blood on a physical cross.

Jesus died physically, He arose physically, and He ascended physically into heaven.

God does not look with contempt upon common physical things.

Why should He: He created them!

We could speculate endlessly upon WHY God chose to do things this way, but what cannot be disputed is that he did.

In the days of the early church there arose a heresy, a false teaching about Christianity, called Gnosticism.

The Gnostics believed and argued that God had created two universes: one was spiritual and the other was physical.

The physical one was the one we know through our senses and the spiritual one was one we could only know through faith.

So far so good. But then they went astray by arguing that while the spiritual universe was completely good, the physical universe was

altogether evil—that all that was physical must be rejected in favor of that which was spiritual.

Now like all effective lies, this heresy contained a germ of truth: it was—and is—true that since Adam and Eve followed Satan's advice rather than God's and opened the door to let evil into the world, God's physical creation has been under a curse.

Scientists call this curse the *2nd Law of Thermodynamics* or *entropy*: the inclination of all physical creation—all matter and energy—to decompose, to degenerate from order to disorder.

Paul said it this way: *“All creation is in bondage to decay.”*

The Irish poet William Butler Yeats put it very simply: *“Things fall apart.”*

Or, as the chief engineer of the Rotating Machinery Group at Reliance Electric where I used to work used to say, *“If it goes around and around and around and around, sooner or later it's going to break.”*

So, yes, creation is under a curse and things will continue to fall apart until God replaces it with a new heavens and a new earth.

But that doesn't mean that physical creation is inherently evil.

The Psalms are filled with praise and thanks for the beauty and majesty of God's creation.

Not only this, but God uses physical things to accomplish His divine purposes.

He used the jawbone of a donkey to give Samson victory over the Philistines.

He used empty jars and torches and trumpets to give Gideon victory over the Midianites.

He used a wooden cross to extract the penalty for our sins.

But the lure of Gnosticism is still with us.

There are Christians who continue to believe and teach that the ideal Christian life consists of withdrawing from human society and spending one's life in meditation, prayer and study.

But then what happens to the Great Commission?

God has made it clear that we are to be not only stewards of His creation but **ambassadors for His Kingdom.**

To do that, we must be in the world yet not of it; we must labor in the vineyard without acquiring too much taste for the grape.

God delivers His infinite and saving power into our lives through common things because He did not want to leave us in doubt as to where we could find him.

If you have trouble seeing Jesus body and blood in the wine and the bread, don't worry about it.

The disciples had a difficult time seeing God in the carpenter from Nazareth they followed around for three years.

They had seen him change water into wine, heal the sick, give sight to the blind, make the lame walk, cast out demons, feed thousands of people with just a few fish and loaves of bread and raise people from the dead, and they still had trouble seeing God in Jesus.

As St. Paul wrote: "Now we see darkly."

And it was not by the evidence of their senses that they finally DID come to believe that Jesus was the Son of God: it was by faith, supernaturally created in their hearts by the Holy Spirit.

As Jesus said to Peter when Peter first confessed his faith that Jesus was the Son of God: "*Bless you Simon, son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.*"

All the arguments trotted out against the sacraments have one thing in common: they all make sense.

How can God deliver salvation through water?

How can he give us His body and blood through wine and a wafer?

It just doesn't make sense that such common things can serve as conduits for such infinite power.

But don't forget that common sense told everyone that the earth was flat.

Common sense told people that the sun revolved around the earth.

Common sense told Naaman that the water of the Jordan River couldn't cure leprosy.

Common sense tells most people that Jesus of Nazareth can't be God.

So much for common sense.

Amen.