



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

Sacraments

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Text: Luke 2: 22-40

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord’), and they offered a sacrifice according to the law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.’ Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.’ And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’ There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanael, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she began to praise God and speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Sermon:

They are both a push and a pull. They are both the deepest sacred obligation we have as people of faith, and the most unmerited gifts we will ever receive—the most holy moments in our sacred journey—those times and instances are what we call *sacraments*—both sacred obligation and irrepressible invitation. They are simultaneously a blessing that beckons us to *come and see* and a command that shakes us out of our lethargy and compels us to follow. In our tradition, we name two such sacraments; we name table and we name font. Both table

and font were direct commandments of Jesus to all who followed him. “Go and baptize,” Jesus said. Go and baptize and teach them and raise all people in the joy and grace and beauty of this way of living. “Come and remember me,” he said to the disciples. Gather around this table and in the act of doing so, put yourselves back together in my model—in my way. Break your lives open as I have done; pour out your blood as I have done—both unambiguous commands of the one we follow. And yet, beyond the command, both table and font offer transcendent gifts that draw us in and reveal what is behind them, beneath them, and beyond all of us. When we gather someone around that font—whether a newborn infant or someone as old as Simeon or Anna, we do what Jesus commands and we baptize them into Jesus’ life; we baptize them into Jesus’ death, and in doing so, we baptize them into Jesus’ resurrection. It’s the visible sign of an invisible grace, we say—in other words, it’s the intersection of the holy and the human—the moment where everything becomes blurred and liminal, the space that transcends our best understanding, to bring us in contact with the living God.

When we gather around this table, we come to eat, but it is sometimes a small, dry, difficult to swallow piece of Gluten-free bread, along with the tiniest little bit of non-organic Welch’s Grape juice; yet in the act of eating, the Holy Spirit bursts forth and in the bite of that bread, we literally become the One Body that we yearn for. And in the drinking of that smallest amount of juice, suddenly we are reconciled to God and neighbor; new life pours forth. Mary brought her child—the tiny Jesus in with her fulfilling the requirement of her faith. But she also did it echoing the one whose song she sang at the visitation from the Angel Gabriel. That song of Hannah we know as the Magnificat. She did what Hannah had done centuries before to Samuel. She presented Jesus to God, exposing him in the holiest of places to the holy mystery of God like Hannah had done before. In doing so, she remembered who Jesus was and to whom he belonged. Two turtledoves were offered up because Mary and Joseph, while of royal lineage, were not of royal resources. A sacrifice was asked when a child was brought forth to be dedicated, and the least significant and least expensive of those that were possibilities were two turtledoves.

But an amazing thing happened on that journey—that journey where they felt compelled to go and were upholding the strictures of the law—taking their stand alongside all who had gone before. Something broke through just like it does when we gather around this table or that font. After the words *required*, *ceremony* or *obligation* are mentioned six times in the first chapter, they are not mentioned again. Instead the language changes noticeably and profoundly to the language of *encounter* and of *spirit* and to the language of *transformation* and *blessing*. It is language that evokes what happens when we are in touch with the holy, guided by the transcendent. It is the language of surprise and stunning revelation. Mary and Joseph were stunned by the words they heard. It was the language of promises long kept and promises about to unfold. On the way to fulfilling their obligation, Mary, Joseph and Jesus found the blessing of grace that animates the holy.

Simeon, the ancient, pious holy man who had seen more than his fair share of struggle and pain in his people at the hands of the Romans, would not give up and would not give in. He was so connected to the timeless truths of the holy that whenever the people cry out, deliverance comes. Even beneath the darkest shadow of the most difficult empire the world

had ever known, Simeon anticipated dawn. Even amidst life-threatening oppression, Simeon anticipated freedom. Even as the end of his days on earth came upon him, Simeon anticipated the gift of new life. And he offered them the stunning gift of ending their aloneness. As he looked at Jesus, he saw Joseph and Mary and gathered what they must have been thinking in the days after giving birth, once the shepherds and angels had left. They questioned, “What is going to happen next? Is this really real?” And Simeon affirmed what Mary had heard from the angel and what Joseph had heard in his dream, and suddenly those two were no longer alone; they were together. And that is exactly what happens at the Communion table and at the font. And even in the difficult prophesy that Simeon gives to Mary, she already knew what it meant to bear the Messiah. But then for someone to actually verbalize it to her—then the honesty of the sacrament comes through to give her the strength to face this burden—not in denial, not alone, but together—and that is what sacraments do. And that would have been enough. That would have been enough for one holy obligation to encounter something so stunning, but on their way out, they run into a woman of equal faith and longevity to Simeon.

The woman they encounter is named Anna and she is a prophet. Prophet means *mouthpiece of God*. She had been living in that temple for six decades since her husband had died. She had been practicing her faith, practicing prayer, practicing all of the obligations as a way of rooting herself firmly in the House of God. One look at Mary, Joseph and the baby, and all of that praying and all of that wondering revealed the truth of what that family was. Then suddenly she gave Mary another gift. Mary no longer had to tell her tough story by herself. Suddenly Anna was going before her, saying, “This is the one who’s coming. The Messiah is on his way.” On that day of holy obligation, of sacramental duty, Mary, Joseph and Jesus came into the fullness of those sacraments both by push and by pull.

That dance between obligation and grace has played out in the House of God ever since. In the early days of the church, for the most important rites and rituals, the word was actually not *sacrament*. Instead it was a Greek word that was not about obligation or duty but instead about encounter and journey. The word originally used for what we refer to as sacraments was *mysterium*. It connotes exactly what it sounds like—mystery. It is in fact the word that Paul used over and over again to describe what God was doing through the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Mysterium did not refer to the kind of mystery that was hidden, perplexing or puzzling; instead, it spoke of eternal truths revealed symbolically—like an old man spouting poetic blessings for Mary—or like bread that’s broken reminding us of the eternal sacrifice of Christ. Instead *mysterium* speaks to the transcendent quality of human found when humans come into intersection with the holy—like what Anna saw in that tiny baby—like what happens now when we dribble a few drops of water on a person’s head. The original word for what we carry out as sacraments today—remember the grace of God freely given and poured out—just as Simeon predicted Christ would model and just as Jesus asks us to remember around this table.

It would not be until much later in fact until Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire that had long oppressed it, when *mysterium* yielded to the Latin word

sacramentum. Sacrament refers to an act of self-commitment, undertaken as obligation within a relationship. The emphasis of these high and holy acts of font and table would shift toward the response of you and me—those who have received the grace to come and get it. Push and pull, obligation and opportunity, history and future coming together. But then again, that’s the beauty of our sacraments, isn’t it? In life sometimes we need that push just to get out of bed and make it to church on time, and sometimes we need the pull. And if stuck, we need the mystery that lives within, underneath and beyond this table. Sometimes the command within the routine gives us the foundation we need, and at other times it is that anticipation of Simeon that God is still at work—that hope of Anna, that Good News spreads like a spark that enables us to be free from the paralysis of our condition, re-entering this world of ours with all its news of the other six days of the week. Meanwhile we handle simple elemental things like water poured out at the font, or juice poured into a chalice that reminds us of the mysterium in this whole way of living—the way the divine reaches into the very essence of our humanity.

I don’t know why you came to church today, but I know this: on Communion Sunday, this church is more full than on other Sundays. I don’t know if you’re here because you think that you should and that missing this meal would somehow let your relationship with the holy down or perhaps you came because you were stuck and you needed the grace and mystery that live behind it all. But I hope it’s both. And I hope that when you participate in the sacraments, whether through enacting the promises of the font through the one being baptized, or taking food and drink from this table that you let all the obligation go. Instead, encounter the transcendence of the sacrament, for it is in the enactment—coming into the presence of the holy—that we find the real gift of font and table. Since the last time we broke bread around this table, the world has changed, and so have we. As you approach this table today, come expecting to find mystery; come expecting to find grace poured out and the touch of God upon your tongue and upon your heart.

This story tells us why Mary, Joseph and Jesus came to the temple that day, and it also tells us what happened when they left. What happened is that Mary and Joseph raised an amazing child who grew to be strong and wise. He opened himself to the unyielding, unrelenting, unimaginable power of the spirit—that same power we set loose each and every time we engage in our sacraments. So once again we do that today, and may you, like Mary and Joseph, leave here stunned.



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