

SACRAMENTS IN A PANDEMIC

By Brent Peterson,
Northwest Nazarene University

Historians have taught me about the naïve attempt to claim any sense of historical significance for an event while one is in the midst of it. One of the most overused and now disdained words describing this time is “unprecedented.” Twenty to fifty years of perspective (if not longer) is needed to fully appreciate all that has and is still likely to occur. So while the Covid-19 pandemic is still very strong in the United States during this composition, these comments can simply serve as contextual journal reflections in the midst of this season.

In North America, we have been called to reflect on the last global pandemic of the Spanish flu of 1918-1920. It is estimated that 500 million persons were infected with this flu and 50 million died because of it. Stories have surfaced of the incredible challenge and bravery that people during that pandemic exercised. Similarly today, there are stories of pain and loss, of great bravery and sacrifice. As was true during the Spanish Flu 100 years ago, so much of normal life has been interrupted. It remains to be seen what the new normal will be.

Yet within the challenges faced today, it is recognized that advancements in technology and medicine can hopefully curb how lethal this pandemic will become. Rather, than simply being victims it feels like most persons (certainly not all) have more power to prevent the disease for themselves and others than in any pandemic this globe has ever experienced. Yet what will people do with this power. In the words of the great theological universe of Spider Man *with great power comes great responsibility*.

In this era most leaders I encounter feel a great deal of responsibility but often feel very powerless in knowing what to do. This is also true with pastors and other church leaders. In the United States in March 2020 nearly all Christian congregations stopped gathering in shared sacred physical spaces. A few that did gather often produced headlines of great sickness and death in those congregations.

The season has certainly highlighted that the Church is a people and not a building. We do not *go to church*, rather *we are the church*. All of this is very true. Yet one of the key distinctive practices for Christians throughout its existence is being physically gathered together by the Spirit for communal worship. This is a primary vocation of the Church to encounter and be transformed by God through Scriptures proclaimed, to respond in praise, confession, lamentation, and intercession. Also the Church is invited into deeper places of healing and transformation through the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

The essay will reflect on a few lessons and observations about the Sacraments during a pandemic, and perhaps also consider how perhaps this pandemic can also be sacramental. To begin I will consider a brief theology of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. For Wesleyans, God is actively at work in the sacraments inviting humans to respond to the healing. This healing is never simply individual but becomes personal in light of the communal/ecclesial transformation.

For Wesleyans one of the key phrases encapsulating the gift of the sacraments is noting how they are a *means of grace*. Wesleyans celebrate that the sacraments are not simply looking back to what God has done (memorialism), but they are providing present encounters of healing and transformation. Mildred Wynkoop taught me definitively that *grace* is not some ontological substance outside of God, but is actually the undeserved healing and transforming *presence of God*. In this way the sacraments celebrate the Triune God is present healing, renewing, and remaking the Church as the body of Christ. So that to not regularly celebrate the sacraments one is simply missing out on what God desires to do in further bringing the kingdom of God.

Baptism is a great gift practiced and celebrated by Jesus, which the early church understood as a blessed commandment (See Acts 2:38). In baptism, Christians are initiated into the church through the covenant of joining in Christ's death and resurrection (Romans 6:1-6). Baptism is a drowning to the destruction of sin and death in one's life and a resurrection into new life in Christ as part of the Body of Christ.

The Lord's Supper is the meal of the baptized. While one only needs to be baptized once to be adopted as a child of God, the Lord's Supper is a continual renewal of one's covenant made at baptism celebrating the ongoing need to repent, confess, and seek God's ongoing healing and sanctifying work. While baptism initiates one into this covenant community, the Lord's Supper is a meal of ongoing sustenance of the church into the baptized covenant. Also the Lord's Supper is not primarily about the healing of one person but helping renew and remake the Church as the Body of Christ. Again like baptism, the healing of God is the re-membering of the local church as Christ's one body and blood.

For both of these sacraments, not only is it important to confirm God is at work, but God's acts are inviting and empowering Christians to respond and live into the invitation to ongoing healing and transformation. Moreover, the sacraments are deeply ecclesial- communal and not individual. That is to say that while each person matters, these sacraments are not simply about individuals getting their personal healing from God and sending them on their way. The healing offered at Baptism is not simply about one individual finding forgiveness of sins, but about being immersed into the Church, the body of Jesus Christ. In this way, Baptism helps us to affirm that there are no individual Christians on their own. If the disease of sin is isolation and the breaking down of relationships, the healing of baptism (and the Lord's Supper) is reconciling them to God, themselves, and to other humans in the Church. It is this emphasis on the ecclesial/communal nature of the sacraments that will specifically speak into the lessons about sacraments during this pandemic.

With this foundation let me offer a few brief observations and lessons about the sacraments during a pandemic and the ways in which the pandemic has been sacramental.

- 1) ***Grace for leaders***: While being a leader is never easy, in my lifetime this is one of the most challenging times I can remember. No matter what decisions pastors make there will be people who disagree probably on both sides. Even though I do think some pastoral decisions are better than others, the goal is not to critique or condemn those practices, but to offer some reflections during a very difficult time. I am confident every

pastor and local church has moved forward with great prayer and thoughtfulness, trying to make the best decisions possible. So while I do not condone a sacramental relativity, endorsing every sacramental practice that has been done during COVID 19, I want to affirm my pastoral colleagues who are leading through a challenging times.

- 2) ***Passion for the Sacraments:*** Within all the very hard challenges this pandemic has caused, one of the small glimmers of encouragement has been the importance of the sacraments in the local church. As a 5th generation member of the Church of the Nazarene, the sacraments have always been celebrated. However, it is in the last 20-30 years that not only Nazarenes, but Wesleyans, and really all of Christianity has experienced a Sacramental Reformation. There are many factors to this, but specifically the rise of postmodernity has fostered a greater place for the richness of sacramental practice. While I have not conducted official surveys, it would be my guess that there are more baptisms and celebrations of the Lord's Suppers happening in the Church of the Nazarene now than in any other era of our denomination's history. In this pandemic it was encouraging how many local churches who were lamenting so many losses included the loss of celebrating the sacraments. This became even more pronounced as local churches began streaming services online. While there is definitely a real sense of digital connection through video in singing, praying, preaching, the desire and longing for the sacraments continued to grow. In many ways this simply confirms how the sacraments in the Wesleyan tradition have become central to the regular gatherings of communal worship. This is exciting and encouraging.

- 3) ***Balance of Creativity and a Strong Theology of Sacraments:*** As an ordained elder and someone who has a Ph.D. in the sacraments there occasionally exists tensions between a good sacramental theology and pastoral practice. For example, the Church universal has affirmed that it is not good sacramental practice to re-baptize someone. Essentially re-baptism makes the event more about what the person wants and emphasizes their power over God, while also saying God was not quite strong enough the first time. Pastorally there are situations where it can be very tempting to re-baptize for a variety of reasons (a much better option is offering a ritual of reaffirming one's baptism). In this pandemic, with a strong desire to celebrate, this is a season that invites creativity. In many ways a great deal of current communal gatherings have been aided by advancements in technology. Yet from the wisdom of the movie *Jurassic Park*, just because we *can* do something does not mean we *should*. In the desire to celebrate the sacraments while being safe, some creative practices have also exposed some places where a stronger theology of the sacraments and specifically on the Lord's Supper is needed.

- 4) ***Pastors as Priests:*** One of the important aspects of the Lord's Supper for most all of Christianity and specifically the Wesleyan tradition is the importance of the ordained clergy. John and Charles Wesley faced a great deal of pressure to allow the Methodist band and society meetings to celebrate the Lord's Supper. John and Charles adamantly rejected this. First, such a practice would have been to literally *break communion* with the

Church of England, where the Wesley brothers saw the Methodists as a reforming group within the Church of England. Also as part of this rejected desire was the affirmation that only ordained clergy have the power and authority to consecrate the eucharistic elements of bread and wine (juice). In fact the importance of the ordained consecrating elements was so important John Wesley ordained persons for the Church in United States because so many Church of England priests were fleeing the states in the late Eighteenth century. This act was considered *out of bounds* by the Church of England and also was part of the history for the rise of quarterly communion (set up as a minimum and not a maximum). For many Wesleyans and specifically Nazarenes both the practice of consecrating the elements and emphasizing ordination has been encouraged, but is not always embodied.

The gift of the ministry of deacons also provided a resource during this pandemic. Historically deacons are a helping ministry that would visit the sick or homebound and often offer the consecrated Eucharistic elements to these persons. The emphasis was not simply persons consuming the consecrated elements, but that other humans would come and help them be connected to the church. When persons can't come to the Church gathering, the Church must go to them.

In light of celebrating the role of ordained clergy, consecrating elements, and those elements being received through human bodies, some pastors in this pandemic consecrated elements in a service, but did not partake. Those elements were then distributed to the people in the local church during the week. At the next digital service persons had those consecrated elements and all celebrated together even though not in the same physical space. In many ways this was one creative way that both honored the strong sacramental theology of the Church and allowed the local church to celebrate.

Other pastors have had some variations of this. Some churches have had drive-in communal worship in parking lots with cars, where elements were distributed. Other churches have had drive-through communion where pastors had consecrated elements and then personally prayed for each family unit in those cars. Several pastors who did this, commented on how powerful this priestly act was for them and their congregation. One of the great challenges in these practices was not simply theological but hygienic. Germ safety will continue to be an issue moving forward even when local churches can gather in large sacred spaces. How can elements be distributed in ways that do not cause potential germs to be spread? It must be said that for all these pastors, while a way was found, it was less than ideal.

One practice that makes me a bit uneasy is a digital worship service where the pastor simply instructs people to find some bread and juice in their homes and then they all eat and drink at the end (with or without a prayer of consecration). Certainly God is not captive to only being able to consecrate elements in physical proximity of the pastor's voice. Also Eucharistic gifts have always been about what individuals offer for the community to be used for the entire gathering. Yet this practice feels a bit too

individualized and in many ways feels further away from any sense of the Lord's Supper has a renewing of the Church.

This would be similar to a digital worship service where pastors tell persons who are wanting to be baptized to go get some water and then at the right time after the pastor prays they dump the water on their head in their own homes. This is simply missing out on the communal nature of the sacraments.

- 5) ***Fasting:*** In light of all the challenges and adaptations some congregations are intentionally fasting from the sacraments. They have recognized how communal these celebrations are and simply are inviting their congregations into a space of waiting. This celebrates that God's healing is not restricted to the sacraments and for these churches celebrates the deep communal sense of the sacraments. This is probably my recommendation and preference at the moment.
- 6) ***Pandemic as Sacramental?*** As a pastor I love and hate Romans 8:28. This verse DOES NOT mean that everything that happens God caused and can bring good from it. Rather, it celebrates that God can take anything, even things God did not desire to occur but allowed, and bring good from it. This pandemic has wreaked havoc across the globe and often in unequal ways among the poor. Yet are there some blessings that God can bring from this disaster specifically around communal worship and the sacraments? In the midst of this pandemic it feels hard to navigate the good from the bad. In the meantime, this pandemic has affirmed how important humans and human touch are. It has invited me to never take the physical gathering of persons for communal worship for granted. It has also offered me a renewed passion for how the sacraments help to better forge and sustain the church together as one body of Christ. Finally, I have been encouraged by pastors who have commented how their people have been much more active in caring for people in the community as a whole. Checking on neighbors and caring for those who are sick and vulnerable? Finding ways to better love and be present (even with a mask and 6 feet apart) to one another, inviting the church to be the sacrament for the world. May it be so.