

## ***This Grace***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Eastertide  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC  
April 8, 2018  
Text: Romans 5:1-5

When I first came into ministry in the late 80's, a debate was raging within the United Church of Christ. Of course, I now know that there is always some sort of debate raging within the United Church of Christ but back then, I was shocked when I realized that folks were truly arguing about something passionately within the church. People were angry! People on both sides of the issue had heart-felt reasons for feeling as they did and sometimes those feelings popped out in ways that were, shall we say, less than Christian. What was the source of all this finger-wagging, voice-raising, "we've always done it this way" lamenting? It was whether or not children should be able to participate in the sacrament of Communion. And this rip-roaring argument was in high gear as I began my career as a Minister of Christian Education in the UCC.

What this means is that during my earliest years in ministry in the United Church of Christ the denomination itself was wrestling with this core issue of belief – who *can* and who *should* be taking Communion. So, clearly the sacraments have been at the core of my ministerial experience from the very beginning. Important to know however is that arguments about the

sacraments have been front and center in the church for as long as there's been a church. What sacraments are; what they aren't; who should receive them; who should under no circumstances receive them; what it means if you don't receive them at all; what it means if you want to receive them but are forbidden to; what it means if you can't receive them and could care less -- all of these are facets of arguments over the sacraments that have come up and still come up, more than we might realize. And this doesn't even touch on the arguments over specific details of the sacraments – who can perform them and how and when.

Today, it's hard to believe folks could get so riled up about something like the sacraments in the church. Or is it? We've had a few in this church, primarily over Communion. Little cups served in the pews or coming forward to receive the elements by intinction has raised a few eyebrows just since I've been here. So too has been our decision to go with gluten free bread in order to be fully inclusive of folks with medical conditions that preclude the consumption of gluten in even the tiniest of quantities. So, even though we might think the sacraments are no big deal here in our own church, they are. And that's as it should be. The sacraments, in any Christian church, hold a unique place in the practice of individual faith even if that practice and their role in sustaining it is rarely explored in any depth. In short, the sacraments matter – a lot. Our task over these next few weeks

will be to explore how and why it is that they matter in the practice of the Christian faith as we seek to understand more deeply what it means to live “sacramentally.” This is the intentional living of one’s life in sync with God’s vision for that life, even when “real” life pulls us away from God’s intentions, God’s plans, for each of us.

So, as this is an introductory sermon on this topic, I thought we would start with some basics which to some of you may seem ridiculously basic but we need to start somewhere. And, perhaps, you still might learn something you didn’t know before. So, let’s begin at the beginning, shall we? The beginning of understanding the sacraments of our own church is rooted in the sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church which is sort of like our estranged step-grandmother if we think of the church as a huge dysfunctional family which in many ways, it is. The sacraments of Baptism and Communion were first described by St. Augustine of Hippo in the 4<sup>th</sup> century as “an outward sign of an inward grace that was instituted by Jesus Christ.” (“Sacrament,” *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacrament>, 04-07-2018) That is still the accepted definition of a sacrament today, even in our church. However, you may be aware that although we Protestants just recognize two sacraments, the Roman Catholic Church went on to establish and codify seven sacraments at the Council of Trent which took place from 1545-1563. Those seven sacraments were,

and still are: Baptism, Reconciliation (confession and penance), Eucharist (Holy Communion), Confirmation, Marriage, Holy Orders (ordination) and Anointing of the Sick (aka Extreme Unction or the “last rites”).

So, immediately the question comes up, why do they have seven and we only have two. In answering this it is important to realize that we do observe all seven of these sacred actions as unique “ordinances” or rituals of the church. It’s just that we only consider two of them to be sacraments because we believe only two of them were directly instituted by Jesus Christ. We do, in fact, practice the additional five. We say prayers of confession routinely on our own and in our worship as a gathered community. We don’t wait for a priest to assign us a penance to make right a wrong we committed because we do that on our own too. Sometimes we may talk to a clergy person for advice on how to do that but that clergy person would never give us instructions that we must do some action in order to earn forgiveness from God. We just don’t believe that is necessary. We don’t believe we need a clergy person as an intermediary between us and God on matters of sin and repentance, or anything else for that matter.

We practice the rite of Confirmation which is the time when a young adult makes for him/herself the same promises a parent or guardian makes for them at the time of baptism as a younger child. If you are baptized into membership as an adult in our

church, you do not have to go through Confirmation although some churches may require you to take a few classes. In the Catholic Church, you would need to go through a period of education or “catechesis” in order to join the church, a process which is very similar to what a young person would experience in a confirmation class in the Catholic Church, although substantially shorter in length.

We practice the rite of marriage but do not consider it a sacrament. However, we do expect persons entering into a marriage covenant within the sanctity of the church to see it as a sacred covenant or bond. Marriage in our church is much more than repeating vows in front of a judge or a justice of the peace or even a clergy person whom we don't know within the context of our own faith community. We believe marriage is a sacred covenant, a unique set of promises exchanged between life partners who believe that God is listening to every word they say to each other in that moment and is then paying attention to see how they live out those covenants. But, because we do not see marriage as a sacrament, we do accept divorce recognizing that despite everyone's best, heartfelt efforts, some marriages are not destined for success. At those moments the church steps in to be of support to both parties in picking up the pieces of a broken hope and putting together a new life grounded in a new hope.

Holy Orders or ordination is also a rite within our church, the rite by which ecclesiastical authority is granted to a person the church has deemed worthy of such responsibility after a rigorous process involving education, practical experience, specific training and on-going evaluation by both lay leaders and other clergy over a period of several years prior to ordination. It is not a sacrament to us because Jesus was not himself ordained, nor did he ordain anyone. Ordination in our denomination has its roots in both the Old and New Testaments where the robe and stole recall the mantle of the prophet Elijah and the task with which we clergy are called is to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed in scripture. Important to know here is that in the United Church of Christ our clergy are set apart, not set above as is the case with priests in the Catholic Church. As clergy persons, we are not intermediaries between the people and God. We believe that everyone has direct access to God. Our task is to be guides, confidants and shepherds for the lifelong journey each person undertakes as a person of faith.

Finally, anointing of the sick is again a rite we practice routinely, but it is not seen as a sacrament because anyone can do it for someone else. For many of you whom I have visited when you have been ill, you know I always offer to pray with you and I sometimes offer an anointing if I think the person would find it meaningful. Do know I am always happy to do this, you have but

to ask. In the Catholic Church, the sacrament of the sick is also known as “Extreme Unction” and for a long time it was known as “last rites.” This is because it was a common practice for priests to be called only to death beds. That all changed in the Vatican Council II during the 1970’s when the value of the sacrament to anyone who was ill was recognized. However, old habits die hard and some folks still cringe when the chaplain shows up. “Am I dying??” they ask in a panic!

That brings us now to the two actions we do consider sacraments – Baptism and Communion. We do see them, as Augustine said, as outward signs of an invisible grace. In other words they are a tangible representation of the grace of God coming into our lives through two specific actions. Baptism is the act of initiation into the community of the faithful as either a small child or an adult. Baptism is most commonly done in a UCC church through sprinkling of water from the baptismal font, but full emersion in a body of water is also done when requested. Holy Communion is a sacred act of remembrance of the grace imparted to us by Jesus through the elements of the last meal he shared with his disciples. It is understood to be spiritual sustenance for the lifelong journey of faith. We will explore the complex theology of Baptism and Holy Communion in future sermons in this series, but for our purposes today, it’s enough to recognize how and why they matter to us. Stay tuned for details!

So in the end, what it all comes down to when we are talking about sacraments is grace. God's grace freely given and completely unearned by each one of us is what makes us, in the final analysis, people of faith, people of God. God's grace, which is what Paul is talking about in the text we read this morning, is a gift pure and simple. Paul talks about "this grace in which we stand" in his letter to the Romans. By that he means this unearned gift of God's unqualified and unfathomable love for us in spite of all the reasons God has not to love us because we humans are inherently sinful. Even the most pious of us has moments when we are less than God would want us to be. We get angry. We feel hateful when we believe we have been wronged. We are jealous of other people. We are willing to bend or break the rules if it means we get what we want. We hurt other people, knowingly and unknowingly. And yet in spite of all of these things we do all the time, God loves us. God sees us as precious and worthy of God's love even and especially when we are not. The sacraments are what help us in our quest to be the people God always intended us to be by connecting us with God directly and tangibly. Paul reminds us that no matter what we do or don't do, we always have access to hope which does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts.

God's love has been poured into our hearts! Imagine that!  
All that we need to live life sacramentally in harmony with God



and God's plans for us has already been given to us! The rest, however, is totally up to us. In the weeks ahead we will explore together in much more detail what our two sacraments – Baptism and Communion – mean as anchor points for the Christian life lived in the real world from day to day. As we do, we will also be expanding our understanding and hopefully our experience of what it means to live sacramentally each day. We will strive together to uncover and recover God's dreams for each of us and this amazing community of the faithful we call church. I think this will be an amazing spiritual journey as well as an incredible challenge and an exciting opportunity! Are you ready?? Buckle up because here we go... Amen.