Means of Grace – Jeff Belt

On the road to Emmaus two of Jesus' followers had their hearts strangely warmed as Jesus opened the Scriptures so that they could understand what had happened, but it wasn't until

He broke the bread that their eyes were opened and they then knew who He was. God has given to us many ways through which our hearts become strangely warmed and our eyes are opened to the presence of Christ. We call these moments, these holy moments, these grace filled moments, means of grace.

This talk is titled Means of Grace and my name is Jeff Belt.

It is in these moments that Christ is represented or becomes present to us anew. It is in these times when we have a spiritual encounter with the risen Christ.

These sacred moments, through which we receive His grace, are called sacraments. They involve our physical senses through the outward and visible signs but they also involve our spiritual senses, as God's grace, through the presence of the Holy Spirit does His work in our hearts.

There are many sacraments, sacred moments, that are performed in the life of the church that are based upon the particular expressions of that denominational tradition. Within Christianity most Christians affirm and recognize two sacraments. These two sacraments are central to the life of all expressions of the Christian faith. The reason why the two are recognized as central to the life of the church is that Jesus instituted them.

In the gospel of Matthew chapter 28 verse 19, that's Matthew 28:19 Jesus says to His disciples "Go ...make disciples baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And in the gospel of Luke chapter 22 verse 19, that's Luke 22:19 during the Passover meal, Jesus said during the meal, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. Then he took the cup and blessed it and gave it to His disciples saying, this is the blood of the new covenant in my blood that shall be spilled out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. And as often as you drink it do it in remembrance of me.

Some churches consider other rites or practices to be sacramental as well. For instance the Roman Catholic Church, ever since the Council of Trent which took place between 1545 and 1563, the Church has celebrated seven sacraments. Along with baptism and Holy Communion, they celebrate penance, marriage, holy orders-ordination, confirmation and healing-last rites as sacraments.

Because not all within Christianity celebrate all the sacraments, in the same way we must practice love within the Body of Christ. We may not agree on these matters concerning God's grace and how they are expressed through the sacraments but as John Wesley, who founded the Methodist movement, said, "We may not all believe alike, but we can all love alike. In other words we may disagree on these matters concerning the sacraments but we must do so in the Spirit of Christ. For Christ's body is not divided and the sacraments, which are to be His means of expressing His grace, are not meant to divide us but instead unite us.

Most of the time that I want to spend with you this morning will focus on the two sacraments that most followers of Christ consider to be the two essential ones for the Church. But again, that does not mean that God does not show us His grace through other means or by other ways.

Baptism:

Baptism is an outward act and a visible sign using water expressing something of spiritual significance. Baptism is a symbol that reminds us of the work of God's grace in the heart of a person.

Why is baptism so significant? Well as you probably remember, Jesus' own baptism marked the beginning of his public ministry. As you remember when John was baptizing along the Jordan River, Jesus came and offered himself for baptism, not because of any sin in His life but in order to fulfill all righteousness. We find this incident recorded in the three gospels, Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, and Luke 3:21-22. John told the people, "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming ...He will baptized you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

The importance of baptism is seen in the fact that Jesus entrusted the ministry of baptism with His own disciples. We find this in the Great Commission that is recorded in the gospel of Matthew chapter 28 verses 19-20, that's Matthew 28:19-20.

In the book of Acts chapter 2, that's Acts 2, we read that at Pentecost, the promise baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire gave birth to the very church which is still very much alive today. The significance of baptism is that it marks us as disciples of Jesus Christ. It is the beginning of our spiritual journey with Him.

One of the areas that we tend to put a lot of focus in regards to this sacrament is the way or the mode in which we baptize and the age at which we baptize. It should not be a sticking point for those within the Body of Christ, but it often does. It is essential that we try to understand how others in the Body of Christ view this sacrament and respect their understanding of this expression of God's grace. And that is key, because we need to remember that the sacrament of baptism is a gift from God and is not something that we have created. Baptism is God's act and action that we participate in as the recipient of His grace.

The modes of baptism that often practiced include:

Immersion or put under the water. This way or mode of baptizing an individual symbolizes being buried with Christ and raised with Him in order to walk in newness of life. The reference to this is found in Paul's writing in the book of Romans chapter 6 verses 3-4, that's Romans 6:3-4

A second mode or way of baptizing an individual was by way of pouring. This is offered where large bodies of water are not available. This perhaps was the way that Jesus was baptized.

The third way or mode of baptizing an individual is by sprinkling. Again this way is offered when there are not large bodies of water available. In Ezekiel 36:25 we read, "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean."

Our focus should not be upon the amount of water but upon the grace of God. For it is the grace of God that brings that individual to their baptism and it is God's grace that will bring about the transformation in the person's life.

The age at which a person is baptized also varies among the many Christian traditions. When adults are baptized, we are celebrating both God's love and justifying grace together in one act. When an adult is baptized it shows that God's offer of a relationship is accepted and the person is cleansed from their sin and incorporated into Christ body.

When an infant is baptized, the congregation or church is celebrating God's unconditional love and promise for the child's life. In infant baptism, the traditions that hold to this, are simply acknowledging that it is only by God's grace that a person will come to Christ. Left to ourselves we would not seek God, it is God who has sought us. Thus by baptizing a child, this act is acknowledging God's grace that is at work in the child's life. Listen to what Jesus says concerning children and his kingdom, "Let the little children come to me, do not hinder them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly, I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

It will be through the commitment of the parents and the congregation that God's love is made real for that child, and the action begun in baptism comes to completion in confirmation.

When I meet with a couple who is having their child baptized. I share with them that baptism is the expression of God's grace. I also tell them that by their example and the church's example this child will be given the opportunity to accept for themselves the gift of salvation that is offered to them through Jesus Christ.

Holy Communion:

The second sacrament that is held by the vast majority of Christians is the sacrament of Holy Communion. It's interesting to note that the various Christian traditions refer to this sacrament by different names. Aside from Holy Communion it is also called The Lord's Table, the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist which means grateful, the Divine Liturgy which is Eastern Orthodox, and Mass by the Roman Catholic Church.

Jesus, himself, instituted this sacrament, sacred moment during the last Passover meal that he shared with his disciples. He then commanded them to continue to share the bread and the cup of the new covenant in remembrance of him. This is accounted for us in Luke's gospel chapter 22 verses 19-20, that’s Luke 22:19-20

As I mentioned at the very beginning of my talk with you, Jesus shared a meal with the travelers on the road to Emmaus. And when he broke the bread, their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. Luke 24:13-35. Since that time disciples/followers of Jesus Christ have shared in the sacramental meal that re-presents the life, death, and resurrected Jesus Christ to all who come to receive it in faith.

So, what does it mean when we come to the Lord’s Table? What does it do for us?

Most importantly we experience the inward and spiritual grace conveyed to us through the visible elements of bread and juice or wine.

At this table we are all welcomed and fed. And at this table we can catch a glimpse of the way God intends the world to be- that is, all of us sharing the bread of life and the cup of salvation together in a spirit of gratitude and love for God and for one another.

For me personally the sacrament of Holy Communion reminds me of the sin that is in my life but at the same it reminds me of the sacrifice that Jesus made in order to pay for the penalty of my sin. Holy Communion reminds me that I was once lost and now I am found. It reminds me that I was once dead but now because of Jesus Christ’s sacrifice on the cross I am alive It reminds me that I am forgiven.

It reminds me that I need to forgive just as God has forgiven me through Jesus Christ. Thus far I have shared with you two ways in which we experience the grace of God. These means of grace are ways that God meets our deepest human need. And while every sacrament is a sacred moment, we cannot call every sacred moment a sacrament. The two sacraments that I have shared with you thus far in this talk are meant to be shared within the community of faith. They were meant to be carried out within the Body of Christ.

There are many other means of grace that we can describe as sacred moments. Some of the sacred moments come as a surprise to us. God may come to us at the birth of a child, especially our own when we get to witness the miracle of birth. He may come to us as we experience the majesty of a sun set or sun rise. Those moments when we witness God’s presence in His creation. Those God moments when we see His handiwork on a clear night and the universe literally lays before us .God's presence can be sensed in a timely visit from another Christian friend who comes to encourage us or give us direction. Each of these moments of grace are means by which we are connected to the living God and the grace that is given through those moments deeply touches us and often transforms us.

There are other sacred moments that come to us by divine appointment. In these times God has given the church special ways to remember and experience Jesus Christ. These sacred moments within the life of the church are called rites, ordinances, or ceremonies. For example they might include worship services, devotional times with prayer, giving to the poor, visiting the sick or those imprisoned. At these times we can experience God's grace.

In the sacred moment of confirmation, the church celebrates the spiritual growth and conscious choice of the individual who is being confirmed. Confirmation marks, the one being confirmed, decision to accept the relationship offered by God that was begun at baptism and affirmed in a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ. In those traditions that baptize their infants the church is saying that you are marked as a beloved child of God. You belong to this family and you are loved. And we are going to do everything within our power to live before you the gospel in order that you might accept the gift of salvation that is offered to you through Jesus Christ.

In confirmation the confirmand is saying" You are my God. I accept the offer of salvation that is offered to me in Jesus Christ. I ask for you forgiveness and repent of the sin that separates You from me. I want to live my life in relationship with you and this family of faith."

Confirmation signals a transition to a new level of personal responsibility for one's own faith. Just as in the Jewish tradition a bar mitzvah marks the transition from childhood to young adulthood, confirmation marks the transition from spiritual childhood to the personal acceptance of responsibility for living as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Just as in baptism and Holy Communion are viewed differently in the various traditions of Christianity, so is confirmation. In the traditions that practice infant baptism ( United Methodist, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalian and Roman Catholic) confirmation is understood as the time when the young person accepts for him/her self the gift of salvation.

For the Baptists, the Church of Christ, and others within the Anabaptist tradition, the individual's profession of faith, confirmation and baptism happen at approximately in the same time.

In the Priesthood of All Believers talk you learned that in baptism every Christian is called into a life of ministry. When we speak of ministry we are simply saying in service for Christ. And with this call into a life of service God has given to every Christian spiritual gifts that equips him or her for that service as found in Ephesians 4:1 1-13.

Also every Christian has a part to play within the Body of Christ that is essential to the health and well being of Christ's Body, His Church. I have said this to say that not all Christians are called into or set apart for the purpose of word, sacrament or order. Another means of God's grace is in the rite of ordination. Ordination is the sacred moment when the Church marks the transition of those called to pastoral leadership or some other form of specialized ministry within the Body of Christ. When an individual answers the call to ministry their ordination affirms and challenges those called by God to use their unique gifts to equip others in Christ Body for ministry.

Another means of grace that is considered to be sacred, but not necessarily a sacrament in some traditions is marriage. In some traditions for a person to remain single and to be in full service to Christ, this too is considered to be sacred. For it is the grace of God that empowers us to live a loving and productive life, both in singleness for some, and in marriage.

God calls all of His children to a life of ministry, as well as to a life that is filled with meaningful and loving relationships. These are both made possible because we are all members of the Body of Christ. As members of Christ body, we each find our true selves as we share our lives with one another.

Individuals who are called to singleness can experience God's grace and joy.

The single person can find in their relationship with Christ all that is needed for complete holiness and happiness. Within the Roman Catholic tradition the priest and nuns remain single in order that their full focus can be upon their relationship with Christ.

The apostle Paul himself even lifted up this aspect of being single for the sake of the gospel. At the same time he did not say that it was something that was commanded by Christ to be carried out for the advancement of the kingdom.

Individuals called to marriage can also experience God's abundant grace and joy. As Christians we believe that in marriage the uniting of a man and a woman is done in the presence of God. The Scriptural reference for this is the gospel of Matthew chapter 19:4-6, that’s Matthew 19:4-6. The apostle Paul also said that marriage is a means by which the union between Christ and His Church can be revealed to the world. The love between a husband and his wife is a foretaste of what the relationship we shall experience when we are fully united with Jesus Christ. God also intends for marriage to be a means of grace for children that will come from the marriage.

Sacred moments are also divine appointments with God. There are a number of daily practices that enables us to experience God's presence and to be connected to Him. I want to share six of these with you. They are familiar to many of you. And I am sure that you already practice some of these on an ongoing fashion.

Number One: Prayer:

For me prayer is a conversation with God. It is comprised of both listening and speaking. Unfortunately we have the tendency to spend more of our time in prayer upon the speaking part of the conversation. Much like we do in our day to day conversations with others. Prayer, how important is it? Well as you probably already know Jesus spent a great deal of time in prayer. At critical junctures in his life he prayed.

When he chose the twelve disciples he prayed. When he was tempted in the wilderness I'm sure that he prayed. The night of his betrayal, yes, you guessed it he prayed. Some of these Scriptural references are: Luke 6: 12, 9: 18, II: I and Mark I :35 and 6:46. Prayer is that time when we listen to God speak to us. It is when we open our hearts to God's presence. The Scripture tells us to be still and know that He is God. We are also called upon to pray for others. Ephesians 3: 14-19 and Philippians 4:6-7

Number Two: Reading the Scriptures:

One of the most important ways that God speaks to us is through His own word. There are many voices out there that are clamoring for our attention. And there are many even within the Christianity community that offer us guidance through the interpretation of the Scriptures. But there is nothing more important than to simply sit down and allow God to speak to you directly though His Word.

Number Three: Worship:

Worship is another way through which we can experience the presence of God. Yes we can worship by ourselves and it is important for us to do so. But we must worship corporately. We must be together. It is important that we share in worship together. It is through worship that we focus upon the God. We acknowledge presence, submit to God’s will, and place God at the center in all that we do in life.

Number Four: Christian fellowship and friendship:

It is through this means that we so often experience His grace and He uses others to touch our hearts, challenge our faith and helps us to grow in our relationship with Christ. There was a reason why Jesus chose twelve men to follow Him. And yes in part it was to mirror the original twelve tribes of Israel. But He knew the value of being a part of a group to support, encourage and hold each other accountable in order that the kingdom might expand into the world.

Several scriptural passages that speaks of the importance of small groups is found in John 13:34-35 and Acts 2:42-47. Also in Hebrews 10:25 you will find the words that we should not forsake the gathering together of ourselves.

Number Five: Fasting:

One of the areas that many in the household of faith have attributed to experiencing God's grace is through fasting. If it is done in the right spirit and for the right motive it can be a powerful way that we can experience the presence and grace of God. In both the Old and New Testaments the practice of fasting was taught. Isaiah 58:5-7 and Matthew 4:2-1 and 6: 16-18 are two of these references. The focus of fasting is the abstaining from things of this world and to replace them with the things of the Spirit. It's purpose is to control the appetites of our flesh and to then strengthen our spiritua1life and connection with God.

The first time I tried fasting was when I was in college and I was working at a fast food restaurant at the time. That was an interesting experience to say the least. If choose to fast get with your pastor and perhaps he or she can give you guidance as to how too fast. If you are going too fast for any considerable length of time talk first with your family doctor.

Besides food, there are other things that you can give up that you might consider to hinder your relationship with God. Of course if those things are sinful by all means you should give them up and walk away from them. But at times there are things that have the tendency to pull our attention away from God and by giving them up for a period of time, we will grow closer to Christ.

Number Six; Our Generosity or Giving

Jesus is our supreme example of one who invested time and energy in giving of Himself. He willingly sacrificed all power and position in Heaven in order to take the lowest position of being a servant.

While on earth he led the life of a servant, not demanding his own way, but doing the will of his father. Christ himself said, “I have come to serve, not to be served.” In the area of material things, in particular money, Jesus had a great deal to say about this subject. In the gospel of Luke chapter 12 verses 32-34, that’s Luke 12:32-34 and the gospel of Matthew chapter 25 verses 14-29, that Matthew 25:14-29 he says the way a person spends his/her money reveals that person’s heart.

Sacred moments, the experience of God’s grace, or the means by which we experience God’s grace also occurs in several other ways that are a part of the tradition of the Church. These too find their roots deep within the Scriptures and have been incorporated into the life of Christ’s body. They are confession, forgiveness, healing and reconciliation. Through these means by which God reveals His grace we are restored both in the physical and the spiritual parts of our lives.

Due to the fall of the human race and because we are all born into sin we are not whole persons. However, it is God’s desire that we become whole persons. That is why God sent His Son Jesus Christ. God offers us means by which we can experience God’s grace and become whole. As you read the gospels you will notice that so often when Jesus would heal a person physically it was done in order to also touch them spiritually. He touched them physically in order to bring healing to their souls.

One of the areas that is essential to help us become whole persons is found in the experience of confession. In order for us to experience the justifying grace of God in our lives it is necessary for us to confess to God that we are sinners and in need of God’s forgiveness and grace. As a follower of Christ we will still sin and we need to confess our sins. In the book of James chapter 5 verse 16, that’s James 5:16 it says that we are to confess our sins to one another and pray for one another so that we may be healed. In this case, confession and healing have a direct tie with one another. For it is when we confess that we are opening up to the truth of what God is doing in our lives and telling God our inner most thoughts.

We are called to open ourselves to God’s amazing grace in an infinite variety of ways. Some of these ways that God reveals His grace to us are found in our human relationships, at the birth of child, the return of a loved one, or a random act of kindness.

Other ways that reveals His grace is found in the created world, at seen in the beauty of a flower, a sunset or sunrise, the grandeur of the moments, the thunder of the surf at the ocean, the open sky at night when your mind takes you on a journey into eternity. These and many more are those places that God, through the creation, we can see and experience His Grace.

I have shared with you several ways that God reaches us, touches us, and changes us by His grace through our physical senses as well as our spiritual senses. In order for us to fully experience God’s grace and to experience this new life in Christ, we need to make room, we need to let go, we need to let something that is a part of our nature die.

In the book of John chapter 15 verses 1-2, that’s John 15:1-2 Jesus makes it clear that God is in the business of pruning away the dead branches and those unproductive parts of our life in order to make us more fruitful and productive. Because we know that God loves us and wants the very best for us, there are those things in our lives that need keep us from experiencing the fullness of His grace. It is God’s desire that we become fruitful.

We will now move to the sanctuary for a special service of Holy Communion, this sacred meal where the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ will be represented to us. And just like those disciples on the road to Emmaus that had their hearts burning within them and their eyes opened. May this time we spend together be a heartwarming and eye opening experience for us as well.

Please go in silence and sit with your table group.