

**Reading Lenses:
How is the Bible Holy?**

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Part I: What Is a Sacrament?

What is a sacrament? This is not a rhetorical question this morning, this is a real question. What is a sacrament? Communion, yes, that is one of our sacraments. Baptism is our other sacrament. Does anybody know the definition of a sacrament? Colleen just said, “a ritual action which means more than just the temporal action that is taking place at that time”. The definition of a sacrament is this: It is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace. As protestants we have two sacraments – one is baptism and the other is communion. If we were Catholic, we would have seven; we are not, we have two. But, maybe there are more than just these two sacraments.

Marcus Borg, who wrote *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* - this book that so many of us are reading, suggests that actually anything in life could become sacramental. If we are willing to be open to God's presence and to the movement of the Holy Spirit in that thing, in that place, through that person, in that event then anything could be sacramental. It could be that nature becomes a sacrament, or art, or music, or sports, or sex –these things have the capacity to be sacramental because we are able to experience God in those things and in those moments and in those places.

I am sure that, for all of you, there have been holy moments in your life that have absolutely nothing to do with baptism or communion. There are holy places that are not at the font or at the table. There have been holy events which have happened some place other than in a sanctuary.

And so, as we prepare for the word preached this morning, I would invite you to think of those things – to feel what it's like to be in those holy places, to feel

what it is like to have that sacred thing in your hand.

Let us pray together: Oh God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be found acceptable in your sight, oh God, for you are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Listen to these words:

holy is the dish and drain
the soap and sink, and the cup and plate
the warm wool socks, and the cold white tile
showerheads and good dry towels
and frying eggs that sound like psalms
with bits of salt measured in my palm
it's all part of a sacrament
as holy as the day is spent

holy is the busy street
and cars that boom with passion's beat
and the check-out girl, counting her change
and the hands that shook my hands today
and hymns of geese fly overhead
and they spread their wings like their parents did
blessed be the dog that runs in her sleep
to chase some wild and elusive thing

holy is the familiar room
and quiet moments in the afternoon
and folding sheets like folding hands
to pray as only laundry can
I am letting go of all my fear
like autumn leaves made of earth and air
for the summer came and the summer went
as holy as the day is spent

holy is the place I stand
to give whatever small good I can
and the empty page, and the open book
redemption everywhere I look

unknowingly we slow our pace
in the shade of unexpected grace
with grateful smiles and sad lament

and morning light sings “providence”
as holy as the day is spent

These are song lyrics from a poet and songwriter named, Carrie Newcomer. She paints this vision for us of the everyday, ordinary things as sacramental.

I am sure for her, that laundry has not always been holy. There was something that happened that made her see her everyday, ordinary, hum-drum life as sacred. Just as I am sure that there was something that made Moses, and us, realize that that dirt at Horeb was not just dirt, but it was holy ground. It is not that the dirt changed, it was still dirt, but suddenly it was sacred.

I guess the question for us then, is when does this transformation occur? For instance, with Moses and the burning bush, was this ground sacred before Moses got there? After all, this was Horeb, Sinai, the Mountain of God – it was called the Mountain of God, so was it already sacred before Moses got there? Or, did it become sacred when Moses arrived because God knew that God was going to call Moses to do this thing. Did it become sacred then? I don't know. Is it that it only became holy when God called out to Moses and Moses heard God's voice? Is that the moment when it became sacred ground? If so, what would have happened – if instead of turning toward the bush and saying “God, I am here” - if Moses would have run away? Would it still have been holy? And what about its holy quality after Moses left? Is this place sacred ground for all time? Is it just for the people who knew Moses, or for all of us as people who consider that story to be sacred in some way?

These are questions that I don't necessarily have firm answers to. But they are questions that I think we need to ask because they are the kind of questions that come up in us when we start to consider what is sacramental in life and how it came to be so.

There are some things in life that are only holy for one person. There are things, I am sure, if you imagined the holy things in your life, that they are only holy for you. For instance, my dad considers this camp site at Lincoln State Park to be holy ground – he calls it that. It is where he and his family spent their summers. I am sure for other people it is just another camp site and actually, it is not the best one. I am sure that for some people it is far less than holy, but for him, it is holy ground.

There are other things that are holy for a particular group of people. For instance, the bowl that my grandmother uses to measure out the flour and knead her dough for homemade noodles, that bowl is a sacred vessel for the people in my family. If it had ended up at the “odds and ends” sale I think you would have junked it before it ever had a chance to be sold. It is battered and beat up and it doesn't look like anything special at all; it looks like a piece of junk. But for us, we know where the flour stops. And how then, there is a place made for the eggs – and how she kneads the dough to make that thing which is as much sacrament to me as the bread we take at Communion.

Then there are places and things which are holy not only for an individual or for a group of people, but for whole communities. Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysburg Address talks about that plot of land as being sacred. And for anybody who has been there, there is something that changes in you when you step onto that space. He said:

“Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation, so conceived, and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met here on a great battle-field of that war.”

And this is the place where he talks about the holiness of that space.

“We have come to dedicate a portion of it as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate - we cannot consecrate - we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.”

It is so interesting to me that he names not only that this place is sacred and will be sacred for all times because of the self-sacrifice that was made for the good of others there, but also that we had nothing to do with it to make it holy. It became sacred because of the action that took place there. Whether it is that we experience greater grace or love or self-sacrifice, those are some of the things that make places, people, and things holy.

I am sure for so many of you, this space is holy, this building, this place. And as we celebrate the 100th anniversary of our church building this year, there is something about that that tells us this building is sacred. But, at the same time, our church is over 100 years old; we haven't always sat on this plot of ground

– and I think that speaks to the other tension that is played out in this question about sacramental stuff. That as much as we are told all of life is holy, we are also warned against idolatry.

God warns us against creating idols out of things and places and events and people. It seems to me that you all and our fore bearers and their fore bearers in this church knew that: not to make an idol out of their church building, otherwise we would still be worshiping a few blocks away in a very tiny space. There never would have been brave people who decided to move the church building, and who decided to renovate this space several times in the history of it. So, as much as all of life is holy, there is also this tension between what is sacred and what becomes an idol. And that question extends even for us to the Bible itself – to the scriptures, and what makes them sacred for us, today.

Part II: What Makes the Bible Holy?

If dirt can be “holy,” surely a book can be holy as well. But what makes this book holy to us?

Obviously it is not the book itself. Just printing the word “Holy” on the cover of a book doesn’t make it holy. And even though the scriptures are often printed on high quality paper with gilded edges and tooled leather covers, it isn’t a book that is substantially different than any other book on the shelf.

I’ve worn out at least three Bibles over the course of my ministry. They have literally fallen apart. Hardly a day goes by when I don’t open a Bible and read scripture. When my Bible wears out, I cut the covers off and put the pages in the recycle bin along with the old newspapers, the empty cereal boxes and the junk

mail catalogues that came in the mail that week.

I don't believe that there are other books that are now holy because they were made from fibers recycled from my bibles. Nor do I believe that I desecrated something holy by putting my worn out bibles in the recycling bin. I believe that the only way you can desecrate a bible is by putting it on a shelf and ignoring it. If you walk past the bible every day without ever bothering to open it, then you have taken something holy and turned it into a knickknack.

What makes the Bible holy isn't the book itself, but the function that book serves. It becomes holy for us when we allow the writings in this book to transform our lives by drawing us into deeper levels of faith. The stories and testimonies in the Bible have shaped the lives of people of faith for thousands of years. It contains the writings that we believe reveal the truth of God to us. This book is considered holy because we have more confidence in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John than we do in the gospel of Thomas, or the Gospel of Barnabas, or the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, or the infancy Gospel of James.

It wasn't always that way in the Christian church. For the first three centuries there were many different writings being circulated among Christians and read during worship. But gradually, consensus began to form about the writings contained in the sixty-six books that make up this collection. The first list we have that included all twenty-seven books of our New Testament appeared in 367 CE in a letter written by Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria, Egypt. Over a long period of time our faith tradition came to recognize these books as the most trusted sources of God's revelation.

In his book, *Reading the Bible Again for the First*

Time, Marcus Borg suggests that the bible is holy in the same way that the elements of bread and cup are holy in the sacrament of holy communion. The bible is a vehicle through which we experience the presence of God.

In our tradition, we don't believe that the bread and cup become anything more than bread or juice when they are consecrated. We talk about communion being "holy" because in that moment of celebration, the elements of Lord's Supper bring us into a deeper relationship with Christ. We re-member him in the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup. And in remembering him, we re-member our own true identity. We remember that we too, have shared in Christ's baptism, we too have been claimed as God's beloved, we too have offered our lives to God in service. As we eat the symbols of the body and blood of Jesus, we remember that we too are the Body of Christ in the world today.

But what about the leftovers? A few months ago, when Joyce Seifert started using that really good bread for communion, one of the youth came up to me after the service and asked if he could go back to the table and have some more. He wasn't concerned that the sacrament hadn't been effective and that he needed more grace. He just really liked the taste of the bread and wanted more, so I told him to help himself.

In our tradition, we don't worry about what we do with the leftover bread or juice after communion. After our celebration has ended, we don't consider the elements of communion holy any longer. They served their purpose. They helped us experience the presence of God as we used them in worship.

We don't believe that we desecrate the holy sacrament if we take the leftover bread home and turn it into a

lunch of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, or feed it to the ducks, or stuff it into a turkey. The only way we can desecrate the elements of Holy Communion is if we go out from this place and live as if nothing has changed. If we don't allow the gracious love of Christ to dwell in us, then we've turned a holy sacrament into a mid morning snack.

The bible is like a sacrament. It isn't the book itself that is holy. It is holy because it brings us into a deeper relationship with God. So let this book become holy for you by reading from it every day and by talking about it in small groups with other people of faith, and allowing the Word of God to transform your life so that you become holy.

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col 3:16-17)." Amen.

