

First Presbyterian Church
Acts 10:44-48, “Washed by God’s Own Hand”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 5/5/24

Give someone around you a high five.

Feels good, right? We are attuned to physical touch in our relationships.
UC Berkeley’s “Greater Good Science Center,”
did an experiment with physical touch:

Dacher Keltner, the director of the program said,

“We built a barrier in our lab that separated two strangers from each other.

One person stuck their arm through the barrier and waited.

The other person was given a list of emotions,
and they had to try to convey each emotion
through a one-second touch to the stranger’s forearm.

The person whose arm was being touched had to guess the emotion.

Given the number of emotions being considered,
the odds of guessing the right emotion by chance
were about eight percent.

But remarkably, participants guessed compassion correctly
nearly 60 percent of the time.

Gratitude, anger, love, fear—they got those right
more than 50 percent of the time as well.”

This means that when we have physical contact with someone, we communicate.

It opens up a pathway of energy and power that can be transformative.

Now think about this: When Jesus was here on earth,
people could reach out and touch their Savior.

Their Creator. Imagine what it would be like if you could touch...
Jesus.

When you are at your lowest, your most wounded, your most disillusioned,
your most in need of God’s love and affirmation,

what would it mean to you if God could reach out and *touch* you
with a calm, reassuring hand in that moment?

What we desire when we imagine this is not a celebrity selfie moment.

It’s not a story that we can share with others.

It’s connection. It’s the conduit of love through physical contact.

Peter, a Jew, had come with his Jewish friends to Caesarea. Caesar town!
They were there to speak with new friends who were Gentiles,
which is everyone in the world who isn't Jewish.

The Spirit of God had been poured out on the church,
but the church was composed of Jews who believed in Jesus.
How would people who weren't Jewish be brought into God's family?
Historically that was done by the males being circumcised
and the whole family following the laws of Jewish religious practice.

When Peter finished preaching, the Holy Spirit fell upon people
who had done neither of those things.
They knew this because they began speaking in tongues –
something that was a sign of God's blessing and presence.

There was something real that God had done in these people's lives.
Peter responds, "Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized."
Well, as a Presbyterian I would say we might want to
have a meeting with the pastor and approval of the session
and a gathering of the whole community
with advance announcement.

But Peter had not be instructed in the higher ways of faith, so they just went to it!

We might wonder, though, what difference it made for them to be baptized at all.
Didn't they already have the Holy Spirit?
Yes, they did.
Were they just "following the rules" that Jesus gave them?
In some way, yes, but we baptize for a more important reason than
"because Jesus said so."

Baptism is a powerful *physical* symbol of connection to God
in which God is present and active within the community of believers.
In baptism, we are washed by God's own hand.

When Jesus returned to heaven in the ascension, humanity lost the opportunity
for direct physical encounter with their Creator.
Only a tiny fraction of the human beings who ever lived
even had a chance to encounter Jesus directly.

But God did not leave us without a form of physical connection in our faith.
What God has given us in place of are the sacraments
of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

These symbols bring us a physical point of contact in worship
where God is truly present and active in a way
that demonstrates that we really are connected to God
in exactly the way we hope for.

Some of you heard the word "symbol" and thought,
"Okay, but...it's just a symbol."

But we shouldn't say that. Symbols have tremendous power.
I'm going to be working from the insights of my professor Dr. Gordon Smith
about why symbols are so important in our faith:

We need to make a distinction between signs, photographs, and symbols.

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Signs:

Signs help us navigate the roads of life—green means... "go"
Red means "stop."

A sign is similar to symbols in that both point to some reality
beyond themselves.

However, the link between the sign and the thing signified is arbitrary.
There is nothing intrinsic in green that means go.
And here lies the difference: Symbols are not like signs in this way.
Symbols *do* create a link between the
symbol and the thing symbolized.

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Photographs:

In the days before we carried the whole world in our pocket,
we would choose a photo or two to include in our wallets.
Or perhaps in a locket.

Even now, we often select a picture of a special person
to be on the lock screen of our phone.

The portrait of a special person sustains our lives in different ways.
There is an intimate connection between that which is portrayed and the reality.

Here's an example: I can show you a photo of my wife and say,
"This is my wife."

None of you would be confused by how small she was.

Why? Because you know the photo is a representation of Sonja,
not actually Sonja.

Well, then, if it's not really her and it's just some chemicals on a piece of paper,
then it shouldn't matter if someone
took the photo from me and ripped it up, right?

But that would be a big problem for me! Why?

Because this photo has meaning and importance.

In this sense *symbols are more like photographs than signs*.

Symbols hold meaning and importance that goes well beyond a mere sign.

However, unlike a photograph, a symbol does not necessarily
look like that which it signifies.

SLIDE 36

What is a symbol, then?

A symbol is something external, visible, tangible,
that represents an internal, intangible reality.

We can communicate more powerfully by symbols than we can by words.

Like a photo, symbols re-present something that has happened.

Then, we who share in that re-presentation
participate together in that which was symbolized.

There is thus a very close connection
between the symbol and the meaning it contains.

Consider a symbol like a wedding ring.

The married couple shares together in the lived reality
of the symbolized unity, promise, endurance,
and preciousness of the ring.

Consider a symbol like a national flag. Citizens share together
in the reality created by the meaning and values
they associate with their nation.

People may contend with each other
about the meaning and values found in a given symbol,
but that is only because the symbol itself is powerful.
Symbols are so important that it is literally impossible
to generate cultural change at a local, national, or global level without them.

In the symbols of the sacraments (the Lord's Supper, and baptism)
Christ gives us not only words (Scripture)
but certain actions performed in God's name
that are physical means by which we are united to Christ,
and remember his life, death, and resurrection.

Baptism marks the beginning of the Christian life,
and the Lord's Supper celebrates the life itself.

These symbols are God's way of reaching out and touching us,
connecting with our bodies,
literally nourishing them,
literally cleansing them,
and when we share in these physical re-presentations of God's love,
we participate in the reality and meaning they hold.

Baptismal water does not look like the Holy Spirit
because... we can't see the Holy Spirit.
But if we stopped engaging in baptism
we would lose our sense of God actively sealing us
the promises of salvation to us as baptized people.

In the same way, the bread does not look like Christ's body,
but if we neglect the symbol, we neglect the experience
of union with Jesus who told his disciples,
"unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood,
you can have no part of me."

This is not cannibalism, it is symbolism: the power of being physically
connected to spiritual realities.

The sacraments are not just going through the motions:
they are a gracious gift,
an empowering reminder,
and a challenging exhortation
to live as disciples of Jesus.

The man in Acts 10 wants to be baptized, not just as a hoop to jump through,
but as a physical connection to the promises, activity,
and spiritual presence of Jesus himself!

So today you have the opportunity to join him through reaffirming
your baptismal vows.

If you have not been baptized and you want to participate in this,
then I rejoice with you. God is calling you to share in this powerful symbol
of salvation.

But please – come talk with me and we'll give that decision
the time and space that it deserves.

If you have been baptized, then you also have a choice to make:
do I wish to renew my connection to God's promise?
Do I want to remember that gift, that empowerment, that challenge?

If you do, we will share in a liturgy of renewal.

Then when you come forward and take the bread and the cup,
you may (if you wish) come to me in the center,
and I will anoint you with the sign of the cross
using water from the baptismal font.

You are blessed and loved by God whether you choose to participate in this or not.