

Sacramental Salvation

Isaiah 66:10-14c
Psalm 66
Galatians 6:14-18
Luke 10:1-9

Arkansas and Oklahoma are widely considered to be part of the “Bible Belt,” which is a geographical area of the United States made up of predominantly conservative, evangelical Protestants. As Catholics living in the “Bible Belt,” we are occasionally asked the question, “Are you saved?” We often struggle to answer that question because it’s not a language that we are used to using. Most of us hear the question, “Are you saved?” as being synonymous with the question, “Are you going to heaven?” which raises two red flags. First, heaven is not something we can achieve; it is purely God’s grace. Secondly, heaven is not the goal. If we make heaven the goal of our faith then we are putting the proverbial cart before the horse. Rather, the goal of faith is our dynamic relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Cardinal George, the Archbishop of Chicago, tells the story of sitting on a plane next to an evangelical missionary. The woman was sharing with him her concern about Catholics in Argentina and her confusion about Catholicism in general. During the conversation, the missionary asked Cardinal George, “Are you saved?” Here is what the Cardinal wrote regarding her question—

She put it to me sincerely, not as a way to catch me up, or as a way to put me down, but because she was concerned about my salvation. I thought for a moment, because I had never been asked that question directly before, and I said simply, “Yes, I have been saved by Christ, but in a sacramental system which demands my free participation.”¹

While the Cardinal’s answer may seem unusual, he is making a really important point. His answer puts salvation as secondary to our dynamic, ever-deepening, tangible relationship with God, especially through sacrament. As Catholics, *sacrament* is what speaks loudest about relationship. A sacrament is an *outward sign* of an *invisible reality*. In other words, a sacrament is something that makes God’s love, healing, forgiveness, and presence tangible. This is the primary way that God has chosen to reveal Himself throughout the entire history of salvation, which we see very clearly in the Bible.

Sacred Scripture reveals to us that God desires our relationship with Him to be sacramental—to be *tangible* and *experiential*. Some examples of such sacramentality in the Bible include—God requiring Naaman the Syrian to bathe seven times in the Jordan River in order to be healed,² the Israelites looking upon the bronze serpent in order to recover from the snake bites,³ and the rainbow in the sky as a sign of God’s covenant love.⁴ There are literally hundreds of Scriptural examples of the “outward signs” of the invisible reality of God’s love. Our first reading today is another great example.

In the Book of Isaiah, God spoke through the prophet and expressed His desire for His people to know His abundant love and care. The way God made that love and care tangible was

¹ *Spiritual Fatherhood: Living Christ’s Own Revelation of the Father*, pg. 13

² 2 Kings 5:10-14

³ Numbers 21:4-9

⁴ Genesis 9:16

through their tangible experience of Jerusalem. While it was impossible for the Jews to quantify God's abundant love and care, they were able to quantify their experience of it in the city of Jerusalem, where God "spread prosperity" and the "wealth of the nations" would be "like an overflowing torrent." Through the prosperity of Jerusalem, a type of sacrament, we are told that "the Lord's power shall be known to his servants" (Isaiah 66:14c).

God's desire to express His love in sacramental ways did not end with the Old Testament. The New Testament is also saturated in examples of God's sacramental love—beginning with Jesus Christ, Himself. Christ is the primordial Sacrament. He is the Word (an invisible reality) that became flesh (an outward sign). Jesus Himself expresses this in the Gospel of John, chapter 14 when He tells Phillip, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9b).

Our Gospel reading today is also a reminder of God's sacramental love. Jesus chose seventy-two of His followers and sent them out to be living, tangible signs of His own love. Throughout the rest of the New Testament, we see countless other examples of God's sacramental relationship with us, including the foundation for the Seven Sacraments—Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Confession, Anointing of the Sick, Marriage, and Holy Orders.

While the Bible does not say that Jesus Christ *created* the Seven Sacraments, it definitely shows us that Christ laid the foundation for our experiencing God's presence and love in those seven tangible ways. For example, because of Christ's own ministry and how He touched people who needed healing, we find in the New Testament letters examples of the Church leaders doing the same thing. The Scripture foundation for the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick is found in the Letter of James, chapter five, which reads—

Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven.

-James 5:14-15

As the Church continued to grow after the Ascension of Christ, She eventually delineated Seven Sacraments (with a capital "S"), that would be frequent and universal outwards signs of the invisible reality of God's love. In addition to these seven Sacraments, there are many sacraments with a small "s" that continue to remind us throughout every day of God's presence and love. All of these together make Christ's love tangible and they help us to deepen our relationship with Him, which is the most important thing in life.

If the question, "Are you saved?" is inquiring about whether or not we are going to heaven, then a simple "yes," sounds awful presumptuous. However, if the question is asking about our relationship with God through Jesus Christ, then we should not only answer, "Yes," but we should describe our relationship with God. What do we love most about our relationship with God right now? What are the struggles of that relationship right now? Answers to these questions reveal just how dynamic and alive our relationship with God is through Jesus Christ!

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

- ✚ How many of the Seven Sacraments have you received in your life? Recall one example of each of those Sacraments that seemed particularly special and share with God what the experience was like.
- ✚ In addition to the Seven Sacraments, there are many sacramentals—daily visible signs of God's invisible love and presence—that we frequently experience. Recall a recent experience of God and meditate on *how* God communicated His love to you during that experience.