

How we Repair the Breach: Bearing Dangerous Sacraments in an Age of Mistrust

Rev. James Kessler

4.28.21

Before they retired, Marina and Ulay Abramovic were performance artists who specialized in vulnerability. Much of their repertoire involved putting each other at physical and emotional risk. In *Rest Energy*, Ulay and Marina stood opposite one another on stage with a large, six-foot, bow and arrow between them. Ulay pulled back on the arrow with the weight of his body while Marina stood opposite and steadied the bow, countering his force with her body weight, keeping the mortal danger balanced perfectly in tension between them. They called it a performance of "complete and total trust." Ulay held the arrow pointed directly at her chest, aimed at her heart, for five minutes. And Marina made sure it stayed there. That's a fair reflection of the Church's mission as it emerges from pandemic, for a world at odds with itself.

The columnist David Brooks recently diagnosed our social crisis this way, "The culture that is emerging, and which will dominate American life over the next decades, is a response to a prevailing sense of threat... A political, social, and moral order is dissolving. America will only remain whole if we can build a new order in its place."¹ He warns that we have entered a stage of profound and pervasive social *mistrust*.

Our institutions have failed to keep us from devolving into a constant state of anxiety and conflict. Kyle Beshears, author of the newly-released *apatheism*, calls this a highly *secularized* culture, one which is, "constantly repositioning where we stand on issues and ideas. We experience a persistent feeling of disorientation, and no one is spared." We are coming apart, and lack the trust in the traditional pathways for unity.

The Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck once described the work of the sacraments in a way especially important for our day of dis-integration:

"For maturing believers, therefore, the sacraments do not gradually decrease in importance but continually gain in value... For every believer and for the whole church, they are proof of grace received, a sign of God's faithfulness, a basis for pleading one's case in prayer, a supporting pillar for one's faith, and an exhortation to new obedience."²

The Church has been given grace for this breach of social trust. Her response to what Brooks calls the "age of precarity," cannot be a retreat into safe spaces. Instead God's people must pursue the historic Christian ethic of *risk*. The Church will have to be embedded into a threadbare social fabric, at work with a new obedience to Christ, for the good of the world. Its ministry in times of threat will have to be shaped by its own dangerous sacraments.

¹ *America is Having a Moral Convulsion*, The Atlantic, 10.5.20

² *Reformed Dogmatics* 4.441

While all means of grace—the Word of God preached and prayer in addition to the Eucharist and Baptism—are a means of healing, there is a particular visceral quality of these two nourishing signs and seals that hone us for non-violent, self-giving social *cohesion*. They direct violent hearts to Jesus, and turn private partisans into public priests.

The sacraments direct our violence to God Himself. Our is an age of violent dis-integration. We've never been more stressed, angry, divided, grudging. As our social structures devolve into expressions of un-love and tribal identity, they plunge our hearts into what MLK called the "descending spiral of violence." Outside the church the good instinct to advocate and lament and speak the truth and agitate has become a civic religion, but the priests and priestesses of that religion operate without an altar. There is nowhere for the violent hearts to receive absolution, and nowhere for the problem of violence to find ultimate resolution. Outside the sacraments one cannot see the just end of injustice beyond our day. We long to see things *resolved* and *buried*, but there is no means, in public advocacy and call-out, no finality in our public *secular* rites of excommunication. So we are not restored, forgiven, healed, repentant. Outside of the Lord's vindication, there's really no way to be vindicated. The result is that advocates for justice are ground into dust. Exhausted by anger and grief, commissioned by a priesthood without an altar, we cannot continue to answer the starting pistol of every appalling injustice unless God Himself can show us the end of evil.

If the Church means to be a part of the solution for an exhausted, weary, world longing for justice, it cannot do so while practicing insular, dispassionately symbolic, ritual life. If those in the church want to critique the danger of public advocacy and wokeness, they cannot do so while offering no real fire. The sacraments should be the wokest expression of grief for the grieving and anger for the angry. Baptism, before it tells us we are home, it should tell us about our homelessness. The Lord's Supper, before it feeds us, should tell us how we are hungry. The Church, in her spirituality, should not steer clear of the controversial, tribal, political griefs, because those griefs are what we wear as we enter the Temple of God. We carry them on our backs like snails. It is in the naming of those things, and in the breaking of those things on the altar of God's great justice, that His healing order comes to bear.

Eugene Peterson has talked about this violent role of the sacraments:

"Jesus breaks what we bring to Him...He exposes the insides - our inadequacies...We are taken into the crucifixion. We dramatize it as we eat the common food. The breaking of our pride and self-approval opens us up to new life, to new action. Everything on the table represents some kind of exchange of life, some sacrifice to our Host. We discover this breaking first in Jesus. Jesus was broken, His blood poured out. And now we discover it in ourselves. Then Jesus gives back what we brought to Him, who we are. But it is no longer what we brought. Who we are, this self that we offer to Him at the table, is changed into what God gives..."³

³ *Living the Resurrection*

Before we observe sacraments, we should consider the practice of naming not only our griefs as a church and as a city, and country, but by naming the divisions at work in the body. We must not leave our grieving and anger, insecurity and fear at the door of the worship service, rather we bring it with us. We must be far more bold in our anger, sharp in our passions, in the presence of the Word and Sacrament, than anywhere else. Before we post about it, gossip about it, philosophize about it, we should lament it, confess it, entrust it, rejoice in the face of it.

Our theology of worship reveals an architecture capable of welcoming the full weight of griefs, sin, and violence. Even baptism, even the baptism of *infants*, carries with it the keen awareness that the one sealed is sent out like a sheep among wolves. The Church of England captures the awareness of this power in its baptism liturgy, that the one being baptized must be delivered, "from the powers of darkness." From the cradle it is the Church's job, before it is the job of our civic religions, to renounce the darkness within and without.

The Anglican Bishop Rowan Williams also wrote on the way the Lord's Supper deals with our violence:

"To share Eucharistic communion with someone unbaptized, or committed to another story or system, is odd—not because the sacrament is 'profaned', or because grace cannot be given to those outside the household, but because the symbolic integrity of the Eucharist depends upon its being celebrated by those who both commit themselves to the paradigm of Jesus' death and resurrection and acknowledge that their violence is violence offered to Jesus. All their betrayals are to be understood as betrayals of him; and through that understanding comes forgiveness and hope. Those who do not so understand themselves and their sin or their loss will not make the same identification of their victims with Jesus, nor will they necessarily understand their hope for their vocation in relation to him and his community."⁴

Jamar Tisby's scholarship on the Church's complicity in racism unearthed a dark, intra-governmental, conflict about the *social and economic* consequences of the baptism of slaves. These lawmakers were concerned that the sacrament's human dignity, once applied, could not be removed; it would create suspicion of slavery's moral authority, by necessity⁵. If the baptized one more clearly bears the image of God himself, then Baptism threatened to redirect racial hatred and white supremacy away from the slave and onto Jesus, a darker-skinned Lamb of God. The sacraments teach us that to do violence to any image-bearer is to do violence to God Himself. The sacraments are the weekly counter-lever to tribalism in our culture.

⁴ *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*

⁵ *The Color of Compromise*, p.25

For all our desire to slay the wicked, God himself is the recipient of the world's violence, and ours (1 Cor 10.14-18, Hebrews 9). In our sin and sadness we hold the string that threads the arrow, that is pointed at God himself, who steadies the bow by the strength of his love for us. And the people who have held that string in confession and at the Lord's Table, will know that before they point the arrow of un-love anywhere else they will have to retrieve it from the chest of their Lord. Could it be that this divine drama could speak deeper words of healing for all of us bleeding ones?

In this way the sacramental life of the Church is designed to answer for the violence of the world in which we live, and that same water and wine bear it away to Jesus.

The sacraments commission us to a public priesthood. Now, ours is not nearly the first generation to deal with the breakdown of social trust. In Jesus' time he confronts a generation with an even greater dis-integration. The political and religious spheres were fully intertwined, establishing a cult worship of the Emperor, and an economic stratification so steep that the Christian witness of integrated rich-poor meals and fellowship scandalized the religion among the public⁶.

Jesus ministers to that age of precarity with the Sermon on the Mount. The society Jesus intends to create would be willing to be wronged. They would pay the price for one another's wholeness, forgiving, reconciling, peacemaking, truth-telling. God's people would be willing to be wounded, a trait so at heart for the Christian that their own Savior rebuked anyone who stood in the way of his role as bread to be torn and wine to be poured out. At the core of Christian theology is the determination to keep oneself in the path of the arrow. To be pierced is the Christian's occupational hazard, and glory – filling up in their own bodies, the suffering of Christ (Col 1.24).

The tradition of self-giving is one of the few broadly understood markers of the Christian faith. Tragically, in the popular imagination, our posture has become one of defensive warfare. Whether we ourselves are guilty of creating such a myth is hardly the issue; it is our duty to help deconstruct it. Both the Lord's Supper *and* Baptism make us a people who receive the world in humility. We build trust by the priestly service of receiving the world's pain and bearing it away to Jesus.

Augustine sees the Lord's Supper as putting the Church itself on the Table. When we eat the Bread, we become the bread:

“If, therefore, you are the Body and the members of Christ, your mystery is placed on the Lord's table; you receive your own mystery. Respond “Amen” to what you are, and by responding you give your assent. You hear “The Body of Christ” and you respond “Amen.” Be a member of Christ's Body so that your Amen may be true...Understand

⁶ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*. P.202ff.

and rejoice: unity, truth, godliness, love...Be what you can see, and receive what you are."⁷

Sacraments shape us to take on the same public ministry as Jesus, becoming the Bread of the world, like He is, and being torn, given, received. The true prophets in an age of tribal conflict will be calling for this bread-like self-giving. The Presbyterian minister and author Scott Sauls upholds this ideal for those embroiled in an age of conflict, *"For if Christians don't go first in offering a gentle answer to those who oppose us, can we ever expect those who oppose us to make a similar move? And if Christians don't take the first step to humble ourselves and become less testy, less defensive, less easily offended, and less vindictive...who will?"*⁸ The priestly humility required in this work of "going first" is part of our catechesis, our training, in a sacramental church. See the Bread, be the Bread.

As we emerge into a culture of mistrust, a combative and defensive loneliness, we can seek ways to emphasize the unity of the church's sacramental life. Consider practicing the Lord's Supper not as individuals in seats but as groups at stations. While this would require significant mobilization for larger churches (not impossible!), the average church size in this country is still less than 100. Administering at tables with 10 people gathering at a time to pray the Lord's prayer, share any necessary prayer requests, and take the elements together, helps re-wire the church for unity and interdependence. In a not-insignificant way, it challenges our sense that a sacrament can be understood as a "me-and-Jesus-moment." Paul's admonition to the Corinthian church was that we cannot be part of Christ without being part of one another. We, *collectively*, and only collectively, become the bread.

Baptized and bread-like churches emerging from a world of pandemic austerity, injustice conflict, and vulnerability, should look for new venues of generosity. The world we are re-entering has been de-evangelized, it has de-colonized from Christendom. This is a missionary moment. If there was ever a time for the church to strike with generosity, it is in the hour when people trust the very least. We should be seeking new ministry partners locally and globally, in difficult and risky locales. The expectation that God's people would overflow in their sacramental life into a public blessing is seen even as early as Deuteronomy 26.12, "When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year, which is the year of tithing, giving it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, so that they may eat within your towns and be filled."

Maybe we can do no better than to quote Tolkien. In a letter to his 21 year-old son seeking to reassure him in a moment of unraveling, he told him to receive the Lord's Supper.

"Out of the darkness of my life, so much frustrated, I put before you the one great thing to love on earth: the Blessed Sacrament...There you will find romance, glory,

⁷ *Sermon 227*

⁸ *A Gentle Answer*

honour, fidelity, and the true way of all your loves on earth, and more than that: Death. By the divine paradox, that which ends life, and demands the surrender of all, and yet by the taste—or foretaste—of which alone can what you seek in your earthly relationships (love, faithfulness, joy) be maintained.”

For Tolkien the Sacramental life of the church reordered our loves, allowing us to maintain fidelity in our earthly relationships. Fidelity, trust, *cohesion*.

The world collapsing under a failure of social trust can be served best by the only truly inverse organization, the institution designed to create trust rather than consume it. The Church is crafted to welcome the outsider, shaped for the outsider, built for low-trust communities. Her sacraments force us to sight the arrow at Christ himself, who steadies the bow. Then the church dramatizes this role by doing the same, standing in the weft of things as it receives the world’s weariness. The density of the church’s sacramental life curves space and time around the other six days of the week, drawing them into the gravitational pull of the Sabbath; rousing us from our trenches to consecrate the common and everyday world to the God whose promises cannot unravel.