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Shawna Darnall VandeLune

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Date

Reviving our Sacramentality for the future of the United Methodist Church:  
A Study of the Transformation Available Through the Font and the Table

By

Shawna Darnall VandeLune  
Doctor of Ministry

Candler School of Theology

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L. Edward Phillips Project Consultant

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Roger Nam  
Director of DMin Program

## **Abstract**

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By Shawna Darnall VandeLune

From its beginnings as a revitalization movement to its current form as a global denomination, the United Methodist Church is based on the pillars of sacramentality and evangelicalism. As local congregations and denominational structures navigate Methodist splintering, ministry in a polarized society, and continual mainline decline, there is a need now to recenter the sacraments.

Having the sacraments central within our Methodist faith is not a new idea, as the Wesley brothers started a revival including the reclaiming of the grace giving power of the sacraments. I hypothesized and found it to be true for the people of Trinity United Methodist Church that when the sacraments are intentionally made central, God still sparks and sustains revival.

For the entirety of 2023, I took every opportunity to enhance understanding of God working through the sacraments. This culminated with two sermons and a three-week evening study. Increasing theological understanding of Baptism and Holy Communion has positive impact on worship experience, boosts eagerness towards receiving the sacraments, and urges living sacramentally in the world.

Reviving our Sacramentality for the future of the United Methodist Church:  
A Study of the Transformation Available Through the Font and the Table

By

Shawna Darnall VandLune

Master of Divinity  
Duke Divinity School 2016

Bachelor of Arts  
Furman University 2012

Project Consultant: L. Edward Phillips, PhD

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## Prologue

Tensions were high and palpable. Everyone was moving quickly, and security was visibly on high alert. There were flashes as the press sought to capture this moment, when how we handle our business and treat one another as the Church was on full display for the watching world. The concourse was loud, and the sounds of weeping and singing rose above all the chatter, as some three thousand people made their way out of the Saint Louis Dome at the conclusion of the 2019 Special Called General Conference of the United Methodist Church.

The chasm between beliefs and opinions seemed to have only widened over the four days of the conference. It was down to the final moments when the vote for the denomination's official stance on human sexuality was cast and tallied. There was a quick and simple benediction given. We were told to go in peace, but I believe the uneasiness was felt by all. No one really won that day.

Finally, the noise of the aftermath grew fainter with each step I took. I thought my turn down the side hallway would be a shortcut. I just needed to return my Young People's Ministry badge before exiting the stadium, but then I saw it.

The table, only partially set. Dozens of loaves still in the cellophane. Jugs of grape juice, unopened.

The plan had been to conclude in a full service of worship with Holy Communion, but various choices were made as the final day unfolded and we had run out of time. I wasn't supposed to walk through that back hall, and I have no clue what was done after with the bread and juice. But the image of that table has been with me ever since as both haunt and guide. The potential for a feast of grace. The gift of sacrament waiting to be received. The Body and blood of Christ not yet fully realized.

## Introduction

From its beginnings as a revitalization movement to its current form as a global denomination, the United Methodist Church is based on the pillars of sacramentality and evangelicalism. As individual local churches and denominational structuring navigate through the current crossroads of Methodist splintering, ministry beyond a global pandemic, and continual mainline decline, there is a need now to reclaim our sacramentality. Since Christ first instituted them, the sacraments of Baptism and Communion have been among our Triune God's greatest gifts to the Church. Very real means of grace, from a God who continues to show up in ordinary things and work among us, and who promises to always meet us in water, and bread, and fruit of the vine. The two sacraments orient and reorient us to who God is, who we are, and how we are meant to be and what we are called to do. They have the ability to unite and ground us in the current turbulence while spurring us on for the future and continued mission.

Like all gifts, they must be received in order to be realized. So how do we best ready ourselves to receive the gifts of the sacraments? How do we help one another to eagerly anticipate what God will do in and through the water, the bread, and the fruit of the vine? Does increasing the knowledge have effect on the experience, and does increasing theological understanding of the sacraments deepen our unity and further our living out Christ's mission?

The real gift of the sacraments is God's grace and power working through them. I appreciate the ways Sutton and Francis termed, "In both the sacraments and other sacramental moments, it is (at least in part) the encounter with the holiness – that wholly other nature of God – which makes it transformative for the individual person. In romantic terms, one could describe this as "where heaven and earth meet."<sup>1</sup> The most amazing mystery of God working in the

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Francis and Janet Sutton, *Sacraments After Christendom* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2021), p. 9.

sacraments cannot be easily summarized and certainly cannot be commodified, and still there is a need for us now to realize and cling to the powerful ways our two sacraments connect us with God and with each other. Unless we are intentional, we might miss fully receiving the greatest gifts God has given us for the Church for dealing lovingly with one another through disagreement and weathering the current denominational splintering. Unless leadership recognizes God's powerful ways of working through the sacraments when they are central within life and worship, we might miss fully receiving the greatest gifts God has given us for navigating seasons of discouragement and sustaining Christ's mission. For the sacraments answer the biggest questions we have throughout our lives – who are we, what we are created for, where do we belong? God invites us to ask these questions and more and gives us very real and even tangible answers in the sacraments.

I hypothesize that increasing the understanding of the sacraments better positions the people of Trinity United Methodist Church to encounter God in the bread, cup, and water. The sacraments have offered us communal experience and common language for navigating the splintering of the denomination as well as moving forward in prioritizing mission and ministry. And because this has been true at Trinity United Methodist Church in Fountain Inn, SC, this could be true for a whole weary denomination who needs to be reminded that God is not done working through the United Methodist Church. God has always shown up in the ordinary things of water, bread, and fruit of the vine, and we need to come expectantly now for God to meet us honestly again and sustain us into the future. Ultimately it is my greatest hope that through my project, my local congregation and all who read this work would fall more in love with the sacraments of Baptism and Communion.

## Background

At the very beginning of 2023, while my Doctor of Ministry project was still taking shape, I felt a heaviness as the denomination that raised me was splintering. I was baptized as an infant in the United Methodist Church, raised to learn the stories of scripture and experience God's grace through the people around me. Then at age twelve I was confirmed as a Christian in my local UMC. The experiences of being a part of the connectional system, conference youth retreats and mission trips, they all shaped my faith. When I was an undergrad, I spent time exploring a variety of campus ministries while at the same time discerning this vocational calling. I'm grateful that when I became more certain of God leading me to be a pastor, I was certain that my own theology best aligned with the United Methodist Church, and I chose a UMC seminary. And now I found my heart breaking as I began to hear slanderous things about this Church I call my home. Worse still were the ways I listened to various leaders begin to speak out of fear for the future as the new denomination of the Global Methodist Church formed. I know, deep down in my bones, that the sacraments are among God's greatest gifts to the Church. I know this because the United Methodist Church taught me and shared with me the power of the sacraments and helped me to encounter God through Baptism and Holy Communion. God, Godself, has given us gifts meant to orient and reorient us; gifts with the power to nourish, sustain, and revitalize. When we've needed these most, I have not experienced us leaning into them. We need to expect and trust God to move in powerful ways. We need to remember the sacramental roots of who we are.

At this same time of feeling disheartened for the whole of the denomination, I was grasping for how to offer the best possible leadership for my own local congregation. As we navigated that the South Carolina Annual Conference released the process for discernment and



disaffiliation in December 2022. I knew there had to be a better way to navigate difficult conversation and disagreements than I was seeing taking place. In January of 2023 as I was planning for meeting with the top leadership of my local church, I found myself immediately believing there is something in the heartbeat of who we are that could see us through this, and my instinct was to turn to communal acts of worship and the places God promises always to meet us. I deeply desired a way to begin conversations from the place of knowing who we are and thus encouraged to show with words and actions that we are each a child of God. I wanted a framework and some common language that might guide our making big decisions together while reminding us of what is most important in our calling as a local church. I have always believed shaping the narrative and naming both the reality and possibility are important parts of leadership. If we really believe our Wesleyan theology of the sacraments and understand what we proclaim in the liturgy, then we are organically positioned to begin work together being united without requiring uniformity. We can't help but honor the God within one another even when tensions rise. The sacraments are where God has promised to meet us, and I believe they offer us all we need to make our way through this moment and invigorate us for the continued carrying out of our mission to be and make disciples of Jesus who transform the world.

We already have all we need to move vitally into the next chapter of mission and ministry, both within my local congregation of Trinity United Methodist Church and for the denomination. We have unparalleled opportunity if we would simply come expectantly to receive the gifts God is giving us. I'm afraid instead we are forgetting our unique nature and history of holding together high sacramentality and fierce evangelism. The people, lay and clergy and every level of leadership, need to remember that there is a place where God has always shown up and worked, and we need to prioritize connecting with each other and with God at the font and the

table in order to move forward grounded in who God is, who we are, and what we are called to be about and do.

We have a robust theology of the sacraments, well developed and powerful liturgy, and a rich history. The problem is we do not pay attention to the words we say together; many have never learned or perhaps quickly forgot pieces of our history; and we don't believe that acts of worship can hold the answers for some of our biggest questions. The people, lay and clergy and every level of leadership, need an increased understanding of the history and theology of the sacraments for them come to worship and approach the sacraments with honesty and expectancy that God might meet them there once more and revitalize us all again. All this that we might better live sacramentally as the Body of Christ in the world.

We already have all we need, and I simply hope to reiterate this for where the church finds itself here and now. Therefore, it is my intention share the United Methodist history and theology of the sacraments as succinctly and appropriately as possible, to answer current questions, and to teach in such a way that my congregation is more captivated by all God can do in and through the sacraments as means of grace given to us. I have sought in my sermons and study to build upon, utilize, and summarize the official interpretive statements of the United Methodist Church – *This Holy Mystery* and *By Water and the Spirit* – for where the Church finds itself today. The Holy Spirit continues, as has always been the case, to move with creative power in the sacraments to enable authentic fellowship, and we need to make expectant space for the Spirit's work.

Paul Chilcote names well how our sacramentality has been all we've needed in the past as he said:

While this revival entailed a rediscovery of the Christian life as a way of devotion – a life empowered by the Spirit and rooted in God’s grace experienced in Jesus Christ – it also reclaimed the central place of the sacraments in this spiritual journey. At a time when sacramental devotion was at low ebb in the life of their church, the Wesleys resituated their movement around the life-giving and grace-offering sacraments. They asserted that through the Sacrament of Holy Communion, God sustains believers in their grace-filled pilgrimage of faith. John and Charles Wesley’s theology and practice of sacraments emerged out of their larger vision of the Christian life as an act of worship – a life to be sung to the glory of God. Their theology maintained a vital synthesis of sacramental grace and evangelical experience.<sup>2</sup>

### Context

I was appointed to serve as the pastor of Trinity United Methodist Church in Fountain Inn, South Carolina in the summer of 2022. Fountain Inn is a rapidly growing small town in the upstate of South Carolina. The influx of new people is bringing new perspectives to the town. The town’s morale is high as most are proud of the way it is maintaining an intimate small town feel while seeing the increase in commerce and population. Many within my congregation named early in our time together the tension they now feel of having been accustomed to knowing everyone in town and living with certain assumptions that everyone has also been here their whole lives, while at the same time now wanting to be welcoming in a way that recognizes that is no longer true.

Trinity has been the Methodist downtown church in a small town in the Southeastern United States for over 130 years. Over the eighteen months we have shared life and faith, I have

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<sup>2</sup> Paul W. Chilcote, “John and Charles Wesley,” in Justin Holcomb and David A. Johnson, eds., *Christian Theologies of the Sacraments: A Comparative Introduction* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2017), p. 272.

learned that there is some diversity in thought, both politically and theologically. Still, it is of note that when I arrived, and still on the formal membership role though attendance is broadening, everyone is white, and every household makes above the median income.

In the summer of 2022, the congregation of Trinity UMC averaged a weekly attendance of fifty-five (55) in the Sunday morning worship service. This has steadily increased over the past eighteen months to an average worship attendance of one hundred and five (105) in the Sunday morning worship service. Trinity UMC has a strong history of close-knit families and being a multigenerational church, and therefore has always included all ages. Still the average age has decreased and the greatest increase in engagement over the past eighteen months has been in children, youth, and young adult ministry. There appears to be a correlation between the growth of the ministries and worship attendance of Trinity UMC which coincides with increased teaching of the history and theology of the United Methodist Sacraments. Our living as disciples who make disciples of Jesus Christ is now rooted in this deepened understanding.

Over half of the worshipping congregation have been a part of the United Methodist Church for most or all their lives, while the other half have come to this place from a variety of faith backgrounds and experiences, and all benefit from an increase in knowledge and understanding of the United Methodist sacraments. In fact, it's part of our calling to share the sacraments in a way that others at any stage or phase can understand, access them, and encounter God through them. Thus, in preaching, teaching, and celebrating I have sought to never assume prior knowledge or experience.

### The Project

From its beginnings as a revitalization movement to its current form as a global denomination, the United Methodist Church is built on the twin pillars of sacramentality and

evangelicalism. I sought to teach this crucial part of our heritage, and at the same time these roots backed the praxis for my study. Our sacramentality and evangelism are intertwined in such that it would be impossible to fully parse apart the two, though I don't believe we ever should. My emphasis on the sacraments arises from the need I perceive for the gifts of Baptism and Holy Communion to be recentered now.

Having as many people as possible encounter the transforming love of God has been the driving force of the Methodist movement through every iteration, and there is mutual impact of this evangelization and the ways we understand and celebrate the sacraments. We seek to celebrate the sacraments in such a way that all present truly understand that they are welcome in the celebration of the sacraments and that the experience is for them. Elaine Heath summarized this history and praxis by saying,

It was more important to the father of Methodism that new Christians be baptized and have access to the Lord's Supper than to follow the established tradition. It is time for us to take our cue from our own founder with regard to the tradition behind the tradition. The soul of Methodism is holistic evangelism, what Wesley called spreading scriptural holiness across the land for the transformation of the world. Evangelism is the tradition behind our tradition. As was true in the beginning of our movement, Methodists today find ourselves at a critical juncture in history. The Western church is in steep decline, mostly unable and often unwilling to reach its secular neighbors.<sup>3</sup>

Heath was urging that there is need to reevaluate who is charged with administering the sacraments, and I think this is just as true that those who administer the sacraments need be able

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<sup>3</sup> Elaine Heath, "Eucharist and Evangelism," in Jason E. Vickers, ed., *A Wesleyan Theology of the Eucharist: The Presence of God for Christian Life and Ministry*. (Nashville, TN: The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2016), pp. 178-179.

to do so in a manner that they make a way for God's grace to move for anyone and that the gathered people truly feel invited into the holy mystery. One way I sought to embody the evangelical nature in my teaching was to not assume prior knowledge and directly answer all posed questions. My goal was to share the history and theology in a way that was accessible and captivating to all.

I also clung tightly to the words of Geoffery Wainwright as praxis for this study, as he said:

One of the most important tasks of (reflective) theology is to mediate between doctrine, or the official teaching of the church, and liturgy, or the formal worship of the church. Characteristically, there is a two-way movement between doctrine and liturgy, where each draws on and contributes to the other. Historically, it is something the *lex credenda* or “rule of faith” that has set the pace for the *lex orandi* or “rule of prayer”; at other time, the *lex orandi* has taken the lead, to be followed by the *lex credenda*. Ideally, there should be an excellent match between liturgy and doctrine, and it is partly the job of reflective theology to help ensure the correspondence between the pair. Both teachers and preachers should thereby be assisted in their respective and related services to the believing community's encounter with God, and indeed the composers of prayers and of hymns for the worshipping body should benefit also.<sup>4</sup>

In early January of 2023 I sent the first survey to a handful of Trinity UMC leaders to get a baseline on which to build understanding of the sacraments, and to begin receiving questions to guide my teachings. We were already slated to begin the year with a churchwide study of *A*

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<sup>4</sup> Geoffery Wainwright, “The Trinity and Eucharist,” in Jason E. Vickers, ed., *A Wesleyan Theology of the Eucharist: The Presence of God for Christian Life and Ministry* (Nashville, TN: The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2016), p. 1.

*Disciples Path*<sup>5</sup>. Individuals made their way through the workbooks, there were a variety of small group discussions, and the book served as guide for Sunday morning sermon series. We began this with remembering, or anticipating for some, our baptisms to be oriented in who we are as we set out to deepen our discipleship. This allowed me to immediately be intentional about teaching around the sacraments, and the workbook included a week about worship and a day dedicated to the two United Methodist Sacraments.

In early February, the church council of Trinity decided to not have further discussion around discernment or disaffiliation until at least after the 2024 General Conference scheduled for April 2024. Appreciation for our heritage was named as the top reason and it was decided that discussion at this time was unnecessary and would simply be a distraction from our mission and ministry. While I was incredibly relieved, I know this was not the end for the problem and need within my local church and denomination.

During the Spring of 2023 informal teaching through worship continued, and we held three infant baptisms after having several years without any. One set of the parents specifically noted the teaching in worship and through *A Disciples Path* as what gave them understanding for why we baptize all ages and the nudge to have their toddler baptized. Through surveys and informal conversations many others noted they were learning new things about the sacraments and gaining deeper understanding.

Each time I sent a survey I included a space for questions to be asked. I received questions in conversations as well as anonymously through written surveys throughout 2023. I sought to address all these questions, which spanned from practically what to the why behind our

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<sup>5</sup> James A. Harnish and Justin Larosa. *A Disciple's Path: A Guide for United Methodists*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2018).

sacraments, over this past year. These questions guided much of my teaching and therefore some of my research. And in the fall of 2023 my formal teaching came to fruition in two sermons in Sunday morning worship and a three-week evening study.

With my hypothesis that increasing our understanding would help us to come to the sacraments more eager and expectant to encounter God, I felt it important that the whole congregation receive teaching, therefore we dedicated two Sunday morning worship services to this. One with the sermon teaching on Holy Communion with the celebration of the Great Thanksgiving, the second with the sermon teaching on Baptism with the opportunity to remember, or anticipate, our baptisms at the font. The crux of my teaching was in the three-week evening study which began the week after the sermons. I wanted as many as possible within my congregation to experience the conversations and deeper learning of the evening study. I also wanted the commitment to feel manageable. Thus, it was three weeks and everyone was told they could even come to just one or two. I wanted the study to be replicable; each week could stand alone with the whole experience being manageable for anyone, clergy and lay, to pick up and commit.

Methodists believe the sacraments are things made holy. We have two sacraments because we believe a sacrament to have been instituted by Christ and mandated by Jesus for his followers. Put more simply Jesus intentionally told us to do these things, and we know that this instruction and the gifts therein are still for us today. In both my sermons and the evening study I shared the gospel pericopes of Jesus instituting the two sacraments. I also walked through the Old Testament passages and rituals of circumcision and cleansing with water for purification, and of the Passover meal, that are important for understanding to context and impact of what Jesus says and does.



I think it's important when talking about the sacraments that we always remember how we arrived at the word – that sacrament comes from the Latin *sacramentum* but we should not lose what is captured in the Greek term *mysterium*, because in both our sacraments there is something holy mysterious and we cannot fully capture all God does in and through them with our words. Through the sacraments, in ordinary things of bread, water, and fruit of the vine, Jesus promised to show up and meet us. This is what makes the sacraments among the greatest gifts God has given the Church, and why we need to rightly appreciate them and come to them expectantly in order to live most faithfully as the Church today. Borgen highlights John Wesley's understanding of God in and through the sacraments saying,

whenever Wesley speaks of the means of grace, and the sacraments in particular, he unhesitatingly affirms that whatever is, or becomes, or happens in, with, or through any means whatever, or any action or words connected therewith, is done by God.... They are means only when God employs them, and we use them because He has promised to use them as channels for His grace.<sup>6</sup>

Our two sacraments are means of grace. From the beginning of the Methodist Movement, the Wesley brothers saw the importance of the two sacraments for revival. John Wesley defined means of grace as “outward signs, words, or actions ordained of God and appointed for this end – to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.”<sup>7</sup> Our Wesleyan heritage has always emphasized that the sacraments actually impart God's grace, and the Wesley brothers communicated trust in the sacraments being powerful enough to transform hearts and lives. Borgen summarized the Wesleys' works on the

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<sup>6</sup> Ole E. Borgen, “No End Without the Means: John Wesley and the Sacraments,” *Asbury Theological Journal*, vol. 46 No. 1, Spring 1991, pp. 64-65.

<sup>7</sup> John Wesley, “The Means of Grace” in Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds. *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), p. 160.

sacraments and the power therein to renew the church saying, “Baptism is initiatory; its function is to commence what the Lord’s Supper (with other means of grace as well) are basically ordained to preserve and develop: a life in faith and holiness”<sup>8</sup>. It’s important to remember that the Wesley brothers were formed by the Church of England and as Anglican priests carried forward that definition of the *Catechism*.

Thomas Cranmer, in the preface to the Anglican Book of Common Prayer described the sacraments as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible means of grace.” He was using a formulation dating back as far as the North African theologian and philosopher, Augustine of Hippo (354-430), one also used by Anselm (ca 1033-1109) and Aquinas (1225-1274). This helpful description has survived through the modern era and remains useful contemporarily in the nurture of new Christians. <sup>9</sup>

Wesley names in his sermon “I use this expression, ‘means of grace’, because I know none better, and because it has been generally used in the Christian church for many ages: in particular by our own church, which directs us to bless God both for the ‘means of grace and hope of glory’...”<sup>10</sup>

It is chiefly important that we remember the sacraments are the channels that God often uses for conveying grace, but it’s God’s grace that we are in awe of, and which is so powerful. In his sermon “The Means of Grace,” Wesley warns that we not let the means ever be seen as the end. Paul Chilcote summarizes the way John and Charles Wesley held together both the sign and thing signified by saying:

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<sup>8</sup> Ole E. Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments: A Definitive Study of John Wesley’s Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Francis Asbury Press of Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), p. 122.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Francis and Janet Sutton, *Sacraments After Christendom* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2021), pp. 8-9.

<sup>10</sup> John Wesley, “The Means of Grace” in Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds. *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), p. 160.

In the sacraments, water, bread, and wine, the outward washing, and the meal signify respectively the inward cleansing and the spiritual nourishment of the soul. For the Wesleys, the sign and thing signified are distinct, but never separate. While the one is outward, visible, and material, the other is inward, invisible, and spiritual; but both must always be held together – the one goes inextricable with the other.<sup>11</sup>

In the evening study we had discussion around the definition of grace and I challenged everyone to define it for themselves. I shared the basics of undeserved favor and unearned forgiveness from God freely given as well as the way Thompson put it in saying, “Grace is really a word to describe how God is for us in every way. So it makes sense to talk about grace in terms of God’s love, because it’s through God’s love that we find ourselves forgiven. We know grace when we receive pardon for our sin.”<sup>12</sup> I also found it important to share with those in the study what Thompson says,

Yet because of the nature of grace is about both pardon and power, we can be both forgiven and healed! .... Walking in the ways of God is like gazing into God’s own image. When we do that, we begin to be transformed into that same image. That means that life lived amid God’s grace is a different kind of life than we could ever live otherwise.<sup>13</sup>

This echoes John Wesley’s definition when he said “What is Grace? The Power of the Holy Ghost, enabling us to believe and love and serve God.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Paul W. Chilcote, “John and Charles Wesley,” in Justin Holcomb and David A. Johnson, eds., *Christian Theologies of the Sacraments: A Comparative Introduction* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2017), p. 275.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew C. Thompson, *The Means of Grace: Traditioned Practice in Today’s World* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2015), p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew C. Thompson, *The Means of Grace: Traditioned Practice in Today’s World* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2015), p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> John Wesley, “The Late Work of God in North America,” in Volume 3 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1976), p. 59.

This one grace from God comes to us in three ways, and we Methodists use the terms prevenient grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace, and all three can come to us through the sacraments<sup>15</sup>. It is one of the amazing ways that God loves us as to meet us with the grace we need in that moment. John Wesley believed that in the sacraments we could encounter our first touch of God's grace, and he specifically called Holy Communion a converting ordinance for he believed God could and would work through bread and cup to grab hold of someone's heart and make known God's love. In his journal entry on Friday, June 27, 1740, John Wesley writes reflecting on a sermon he recently preached on Holy Communion, saying:

in latter times, many have affirmed, that the Lord's Supper is not a converting, but a confirming ordinance. And among us it has been diligently taught, that none but those who are converted, who have received the Holy Ghost, who are believers in the full sense, ought to communicate. But experience shows the gross falsehood of that assertion, that the Lord's Supper is not a converting ordinance. Ye are the witnesses. For many now present know, the very beginning of your conversion to God (perhaps, in some, the first deep conviction) was wrought at the Lord's Supper. Now, one single instance of this kind overthrows the whole assertion. The falsehood of the other assertion appears both from Scripture precept and example. Our Lord commanded those very men who were then unconverted, who had not yet received the Holy Ghost, who (in the full sense of the word) were no believers, to do this "in remembrance of" him. Here the precept is clear. And to these he delivered the elements with his own hands.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> John Wesley, "The Scripture Way of Salvation" in Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds. *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), p. 372.

<sup>16</sup> John Wesley, "Friday, June 27, 1740" in W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds. *The Works of John Wesley*. Vol 19. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), p. 140.

Carrying forward the Wesleyan trust in God working powerful transformation through the sacraments, we have unparalleled opportunity to share God if we only keep them central in both our worship and our mission because in our sacraments is God's love and grace enough to change hearts and transform the world.

Innate in the communal nature of celebration and ritual, the sacraments bring us together unlike anything else, and there is power present to help us see one another as children of God and access unity without requiring uniformity. The triune God created us to be in relationship with God and with each other. We are named and marked as belonging to God in the waters of baptism as we are initiated into the church, and in our liturgy we promise to help in raising one another in the faith. When we gather at the table we partake of one bread and one cup, and in our liturgy we acknowledge the ways the ground is level as we all need and long to receive what is being offered therein. Borgen summarized the importance of the sacraments for all of faith and life by saying "The theological and practical importance of the sacraments for John Wesley lies in their functions. Within the framework of the *ordo salutis* they function as (1) effective signs, (2) effective means of grace and (3) effective pledges of glory to come, conjoined with the added aspect of sacrifice."<sup>17</sup> God's grace in and through the sacraments has the power to better individual hearts and lives as well as unite and invigorate communities, if only we encourage coming to them eager and expectant.

One of the ways the Wesley brothers most clearly held together sacramental grace and evangelical experience was their beliefs that people of every age and stage should receive

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<sup>17</sup> Ole E. Borgen, "No End Without the Means: John Wesley and the Sacraments," *Asbury Theological Journal*, vol. 46 No. 1, Spring 1991, p. 65.

baptism, that it is proper for both infants and adults. Outler highlights this in his preface to John Wesley's *Treatise on Baptism* when he says:

The obvious purpose of this “extract” was to re-enforce the wavering convictions of some of the Methodist people as to the validity of infant baptism and the re-emphasize the objectivity of divine grace in the sacrament. One ought, however, to compare this essay on baptism... with the sermon on “The New Birth” where the stress falls heavily on conversion as a conscious adult experience of regeneration. The point is that Wesley held to both ideas.<sup>18</sup>

So the Wesley brothers saw no conflict but rather held together sacramental grace and evangelical experience in their teachings and lived examples. We need to see afresh the importance of holding these as twin pillars, that encounter with God and mission with God need fuel one another.

The sacraments have been central to the identity and success of the Methodist movement from it's beginnings. In my intentional teaching around the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, I saw once again the power of the sacraments to spark and sustain spiritual renewal within my local church. Thus I believe this is possible for the larger United Methodist Church. Paul Chilcote succinctly summarized the Wesleys trust in the power of the sacraments, saying:

John and Charles Wesley directed a movement of spiritual renewal within the Church of England during the eighteenth century best described as an evangelical and sacramental revival. While this revival entailed a rediscovery of the Christian life as a way of devotion – a life empowered by the Spirit and rooted in God's grace experienced in Jesus Christ – it also reclaimed the central place of the sacraments in this spiritual journey. At a

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<sup>18</sup> Albert C. Outler, *John Wesley* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1964), p.318.

time when sacramental devotion was at low ebb in the life of their church, the Wesleys resituated their movement around the life-giving and grace-offering sacraments. They asserted that through the Sacrament of Baptism, God initiates the work of grace, and through the Sacrament of Holy Communion, God sustains believers in their grace-filled pilgrimage of faith. John and Charles Wesley's theology and practice of sacraments emerged out of their larger vision of the Christian life as an act of worship – a life to be sung to the glory of God. Their theology maintained a vital synthesis of sacramental grace and evangelical experience.<sup>19</sup>

It is God's grace that flows through water, bread, and fruit of the vine. It is simply our responsibility to make ready the environment for God to move and to teach the people so that they would come to receive, eager and expectant.

The sacraments offer us opportunity to come to the table and the font to encounter God in a very real way. It is not that increasing our knowledge increases the meaning of the sacraments, because the meaning is inherent. Still, increasing our understanding can reposition us to have greater appreciation for the gift that the sacraments are to us so that we approach with excitement. Counter to a culture of virtual access and instant gratification, God meets us and transforms us through that which we can touch, taste, smell, see, and feel. It is part of the gift that God gives us sacraments that engage all our senses and involve our whole selves in the receiving. It is part of the gift that in a world where we now seemingly have constant access to one another without real connection, God has given us this way to come and be truly connected with God and with each other.

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<sup>19</sup> Paul W. Chilcote, "John and Charles Wesley," in Justin Holcomb and David A. Johnson, eds., *Christian Theologies of the Sacraments: A Comparative Introduction* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2017), p. 272.

The United Methodist Church has official rituals that are theologically sound and historically grounded. Our liturgy celebrates the fullness of the story of salvation and God's redeeming work. We need those administering the sacraments to have enough understanding to treat the words with the care they command. We need to allow the words to work in our lives as we gather at the font and table together. In the three-week evening study we talked through the entirety of our Baptismal and Communion liturgy. However in many ways these words speak for themselves and there are many great commentaries already out there so I will not go into great detail here. While it feels strange now to quote him now that regrettably and ironically Scott Jones has left the UMC. Earlier in 2008, he captured profound truth when saying,

Yet one of the most powerfully unifying moments in the life of the Church – local church, annual conference, central conference, or General Conference – is the sacrament of holy communion where the celebrant says, Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. The bread which we break is a sharing in the body of Christ. People of different races, different nationalities, different theological persuasions, and people of different generations all hear the gospel word proclaimed and then partake sacramentally of Christ's body and blood. God's grace is a unifying force we cannot begin to understand, but we come to the table repeatedly because it is our very life begin given to us.<sup>20</sup>

### Evaluation

Everyone who engaged with my project reported an increase in personal understanding and an enhanced experience and greater desire to encounter God's grace in the sacraments. Over the course of the past year, forty-seven individuals completed written surveys reporting this

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<sup>20</sup> Scott J. Jones, *Staying at the Table: The Gift of Unity for United Methodists* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2008), pp. 63-64.



increase and enhancement. While I sought to evaluate deepening theological understanding as quantitatively and objectively as possible, the majority of the impact was best captured through story sharing and observation as to how increasing understanding enhanced our living as the Body of Christ for the world.

I had fourteen separate instances of people telling me that they now never want to miss a Communion Sunday. I think this would make John Wesley proud to know as he said “it is the duty of every Christian to receive the Lord’s Supper as often as he can.”<sup>21</sup> I find this a direct expression of understanding the power and coming with expectancy for God to move and a sense of urgency for the grace offered in the meal. Seven people served Communion for the first time in their lives and are now a part of the ongoing rotation to serve. After learning more about our theological understanding they felt empowered and developed a desire to be a part of the work of God through worship.

A practical yet significant impact has been the shift in how we go about Communion Sundays, from set-up through celebration. As the number of people gathering in worship has steadily increased over the past eighteen months, our worship committee has had discussions and adapted so all can feel welcomed at the table. It was named at a worship committee meeting in April of 2023, following a Sunday when we almost ran out of bread, that we never want to communicate that “we weren’t expecting you or there isn’t enough room for you.” Therefore, we want to be intentionally prepared for whoever might come to worship. This spurred the increase to how much bread and juice is prepared, as well as the addition of a gluten free option. While this is now regularly utilized there was theological discussion when this was added around how our job is to set the table for whoever God might bring to worship rather than simply saying we

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<sup>21</sup> John Wesley, “The Duty of Constant Communion” in Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds. *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), p. 502.

don't know of that need so it must not matter to us. There has been a shift to three serving stations, which allows more people to be seamlessly served, and more people to participate as servers. From my first month at Trinity, the children began returning to the sanctuary on Communion Sundays to partake of the Holy Meal as a full family of faith. All this lives out our theology of Communion and embodies that we proclaim that the Table isn't ours but God's.

One lady shared with me that she and her husband worship separately in different denominations. He comes to worship at Trinity United Methodist Church about four times a year. She shared with me how meaningful it was to partake of Communion alongside each other for the first time this year.<sup>22</sup> Prior to the intentional language of teaching and initiation, he had chosen to remain seated and not partake even though he had always been welcomed. But the most recent time he was in worship God must have moved in the words in such a way that he came and received and felt connected.

One gentleman sat in my office and with tears streaming down his face as shared how he was raised in a tradition that told him he was unworthy to receive Holy Communion since he is divorced. He has been a member of Trinity UMC for several years now, but it has only been within the past year that he felt truly invited to the table and began coming forward and receiving the bread and cup. He named how special our understanding is and how he doesn't want others to take for granted what God does in the eating and the drinking, and the ways our proclaiming what we believe each time we gather at the table.<sup>23</sup> He even has joined the rotation for serving Communion. All this was after the sermon but prior to his participation in the three-week evening study.

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<sup>22</sup> K.S. conversation in March 2023.

<sup>23</sup> S.E. conversation October 8, 2023.

Eight different people specifically reached out with gratitude for the fact they feel better equipped to converse with friends of other faith backgrounds and denominations around baptism. One youth shared she has felt pressure on many occasions to be rebaptized when attending other youth groups with her friends – she articulated that she felt deep down that this is something God already did for her, and this was unneeded but couldn't articulate why and now feels better equipped.

There has been a shift to including children in worship and intentionally making them feel welcome in the sanctuary. While the children's minister and I have spearheaded the upgrades and additions of interactive worship binders, baskets of fidget toys, a bookshelf of books to connect with God and scripture stories, and more; the conversations in the administrative church council about this have all been positive. One member spoke up and mentioned how we promise to raise our children whenever a baptism takes place, and another chimed in to say this is us living this out.<sup>24</sup>

In a recent trustee meeting there was discussion around how we can make our sanctuary space more accessible and welcoming. We do not currently have a ramp at the front of the building nor signage that help visitors to know their way around. Both of these have been obvious needs during my time with Trinity. One member of this committee said something like “we say it's Christ who invites to worship and to the table, so we just have to be ready for whoever Christ invites and our job is to make them feel welcome.”

When I arrived at Trinity UMC most of the congregation could quote that our mission is “to make disciples,” but when pressed few could tell me what a disciple is and what this means. Increasing the theological understanding of our United Methodist sacraments is far from the only

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<sup>24</sup> May Church Council Meeting

intentional shift this year, still it coincides with and I believe has impacted the cultural shift to a better understanding that our calling is to be disciples who make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Experiences of communal worship should impact how we live in the world. Enhancing understanding has increased our expectancy for God to work, and overall urged living sacramentally in the world. Congregation members have an increased understanding that to be a disciple is to be in ongoing relationship with the Triune God, and to become more and more like Jesus in their daily living. Moreover, a disciple is someone who seeks to live on mission with God and better the world around them.

Increasing the understanding of these means of grace has turned us more outward and bettered our ability to truly welcome. It is often articulated in meetings and decisions that we are all in need of the grace offered here and that helps to guide decisions. This embodies what Elaine Heath was getting at in saying, “Whatever I think, say, or practice with regard to the Eucharist, if it is not dignifying, life-giving, and healing to survivors of the worst that overlords can offer, something is wrong. If my theory and practice of Holy Communion does not include, empower, and liberate persons who are already marginalized outside of the church, something is amiss. The leveraging of ecclesiastical power with the Eucharist as the fulcrum is much more than inherited tradition. There are deep political and ethical ramifications to our praxis.”<sup>25</sup>

While I can't make such a broad claim as to say we are more inclusive or that I'm confident we will be unified should the denominational splintering threaten in the future, I do believe we have begun some honest wrestling together with Jesus' true calling for us. With the undeniable polarization of our culture today, this alone is not an easy feat and yet is a great step

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<sup>25</sup> Elaine Heath, “Eucharist and Evangelism,” in Jason E. Vickers, ed., *A Wesleyan Theology of the Eucharist: The Presence of God for Christian Life and Ministry*. (Nashville, TN: The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2016), p. 165.

in our ability to carry out Christ's mission in the world. In the evening study, as we walked through our liturgies for Baptisms and Communion we specifically lifted aspects that call us to unity in each. I asked what we thought about the liturgical questions from the ritual: Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the church which Christ has opened in union with the church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?" There was honest conversation and one man said "I'm not sure I actually like it, but I can't argue that it isn't a biblical calling." Another said "I'd never realized the depth of commitment we make to each other in baptism... it seems this goes even when we disagree or hurt one another along the way." I asked what we think about the words of the prayer: make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world. There was fruitful conversation and one woman said "It is uncomfortable to think that we pray to be one with everyone, even people we don't know and people who aren't like us." Another said "I've been Methodist my whole life and never noticed there's a prayers for unity in the liturgy of our sacraments." Still another shared "I've always heard that because there's one cup and one loaf we are one, but I've never seen this as the calling that it is. We are supposed to live as one. That seems incredibly hard and like we won't do it perfectly, but it's certainly what Jesus called people to do."

### Conclusion

Enhancing the theological understanding had positive impact on worship experience and increased eagerness towards receiving the sacraments for the people of Trinity United Methodist Church. Through quantitative and qualitative gathering of information the steady increasing of knowledge about the history, theology, and liturgical practices of our United Methodist sacraments best positioned the congregation for receiving prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying

grace, and therefore living as means for God's grace in our community. As God has done since Jesus first instituted the sacraments, God has truly met with us in water, bread, and fruit of the vine to connect us again more deeply with the Triune God and with one another. This nourishes us for living out our faith and reorients us to who we are and what we are to be about and do. The increase of understanding coincided with, and I'll dare to say impacted, the understanding of ourselves as children of God. This is steadily shifting how we treat one another and understand our connection to each other, how we welcome people in and make space for all, and how we work with God to make the world around us a better place for all people.

Reflecting on the past year I think the mixed approach of regular informal teaching through the rituals of communal worship, teaching meant for all through sermons, and the evening study that allowed people to choose to deepen their understanding and have conversation was the correct approach. Increasing theological understanding is so important that it should happen in worship for as many of the gathered body as possible, while for this research and at this current time an additional study that goes even deeper was necessary. While the three-week evening study focused on increasing head knowledge, it too, like teaching in worship, was meant to transform hearts at the same time. I believe three weeks was enough time to answer all the questions about the particulars of how we celebrate our two sacraments while also highlighting the aspects of our theology of why we celebrate our two sacraments that are captivating for people today and promote the unity that God innately provides within them.

One of my greatest learning is the need for leaders to speak honestly and authentically in this season. My experiences of teaching and sharing life and faith with the people of Trinity UMC has only affirmed my belief that good leadership must be foremost authentic and willing to be vulnerable at appropriate times. I was unsure about sharing my experience of stumbling upon

the table at the close of the 2019 General Conference. It has been a driving force for my project and passion, and with the encouragement of my cohort I began the first session of the three-week study by sharing the story. I was fearful that those gathered would get sidetracked with the polarizing topic of human sexuality, but I found they were honest and emotional as they listened and then fully engaged for the need of exploring the history and theology of our sacraments. I found sharing honestly my experience was one of the greatest gifts I could have given them as we all increased our hopes for receiving from God.

While it will take further work to make the three-week study from Trinity United Methodist Church replicable, I believe it is concise and while fully responding to the questions that are timeless and yet ever pressing for where we find ourselves today. Our denomination needs something that can captivate hearts to turn towards the things that have always served us.

### Epilogue

Because deepening sacramental understanding has had positive impact within the congregation of Trinity United Methodist Church in Fountain Inn, SC, I continue to hope this could be true for a whole denomination whose people at every level of leadership need the greatest gifts that God continues to readily offer us.

Much of my hope is that clergy would take seriously their call to rightly administer the sacraments. That the clergy of the United Methodist Church would have enough wonder and awe as they approach God at the font and the table that they share that with the gathered people, and are equipped to do teaching at every level. That those tasked with celebrating the sacraments would approach them with such desire and joy that it might be contagious for those gathered. I currently teach the day dedicated to Communal Worship for our annual conference's Licensing School for those becoming local pastors. I have seen that it makes a difference that clergy are

being properly equipped, and it's my hope that my love for the sacraments is making a difference even for a few clergy and therefore for the congregations that they now serve. Still, it is God who works through water, bread, and fruit of the vine, and this is not dependent on the celebrant, and therefore I believe the calling to come eager and expecting is for all people. Afterall, the beginning of the Methodist movement was the hope to be a church for all people and we have a rich history of being a church that equips and empower laity. Our best way forward would be that all people, lay and clergy and leadership at every level, of the United Methodist Church be beckoned to come expectantly to worship and to eagerly approach the greatest gift Jesus gave for the Church.

I was able to watch closely the plans and help setup Holy Communion at YOUTH 2023, the quadrennial United Methodist youth gathering. This again reinforced for me that God shows up and moves, but we have to do the faithful work of setting the environment. While I had a different role on the design team, I was deep in researching this project and got to be a part of the conversations the Discipleship Ministries staff had to develop the liturgy and plan the flow. With intentionality given to Holy Communion on the beach, I heard youth comment on how the celebration invited them again into the whole story of salvation and the timelessness of Holy Communion. Still others commented on how powerful it was that God would move in bread and cup as they received alongside youth from all over the world.

I have seen that intentional teaching and administering of the sacraments increases the impact of the worship experience at all levels. I oversee worship for Revolution, our South Carolina Annual Conference's annual youth gathering, which concludes with the celebration of Holy Communion. While our Bishop comes as celebrant, I craft the liturgy each year, not reinventing the wheel but being so deeply rooted in our powerful and time-tested liturgy that I



am able to make it accessible for the gathered people and fitting for the weekend's worship theme. I have seen God show up and move when the work that is ours to do has been done well – that the best environment has been created for the Holy to come. I have seen the importance of taking the time to map an appropriate flow and train the servers and ushers, especially as youth step up to serve – some for the first time ever – alongside district superintendents; and I know it is possible for a large auditorium to be a holy place and for thousands to receive in a posture of prayer. Thus, I'm disheartened when I sense that Holy Communion at any large denominational gathering is an afterthought, and I'm afraid this is one way that we are continually overlooking the gift we've been given.

I am dismayed when I see so many denominational leaders not take advantage of opportunities to come to the font and table. Personally, I am making preparation for Holy Communion at Revolution 2024, and while it has previously been the expectation that the entire cabinet of my annual conference come and serve, only one third will be doing so this year. Two thirds of our district superintendents are too overwhelmed with the administrative work surrounding disaffiliations and making plans for the immediate future of a conference with fewer churches. Their weariness is visible, and they are saying no to opportunities of worship and returning to our greatest gifts.

I'm not so naïve to think that more knowledge of the United Methodist sacraments is the fix for the current troubles of a global denomination. I am aware that we are in a season that requires an honest look at structures, finances, and faithful administrative preparations for future mission and ministry. But I am fearful that God has already given us all that we need to navigate this from a posture of trust in God's abundant grace and faithfulness rather than the scarcity mindset that seems to be taking hold. I'm not so naïve to think that beginning at the table and

font will change outcomes, but I do believe it gives us the best lens for making our way through disagreement and difficult decisions.

I know, with both my head and my heart, that the sacraments are among God's greatest gifts to the Church. I am confident that God, as God always has done, will move in powerful ways through water, bread, and cup. We have always proclaimed that God meets us with whatever grace we need in the sacraments, and I trust God will do this once more. We have responsibility to faithfully prepare the celebration and encourage all to come expectantly.

So let us turn once again to the places where God's love, light, and grace has always freely flowed. Let us reclaim the sacramentality of our heritage, and trust that our sacraments will be an equal part of revival once again. We proclaim that it is Christ who invites, we need now to come. To wash and eat and drink to go on as the Body of Christ in the world, working for its redemption and transformation.

Appendix A  
A Roadmap for Session One, November 5, 2023

- Introductions and an explanation of where we are headed
- A Brief History
  - 1054 – East/West Schism
  - 1215 – The Roman Catholic (or the Western) Church has seven sacraments
  - 16<sup>th</sup> Century – Protestant Reformation
  - 1534 – First establishment of the Church of England
  - John Wesley was born in 1703 and died in 1791
    - John Wesley was ordained a priest in the Church of England in 1728
    - 1760s the Methodist Movement was spreading throughout the 13 colonies
  - 1784 – the Methodist Episcopal Church was founded by a conference in Baltimore, Maryland.
  - 1939 – The Methodist Church was formed through unification
  - 1968 – The United Methodist Church was formed as the Methodist Church (10.3 million members) merged with the Evangelical United Brethren (750,000 members)
- Our doctrinal standards – The articles of religion of the Methodist Church; The confession of faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church; The standard sermons of John Wesley and his notes upon the New Testament.
- Sacraments
  - Means of Grace
    - Augustine of Hippo at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century said “the sacraments are a visible action that represents and actually imparts God’s grace.” Or more simply that they are an outward sign of an inward grace.
    - Channels through which we receive the undeserved and unlimited love of God.
  - Instituted by Christ – Jesus intentionally told us to do these two things and these are the ways in which God has decided to work.
- As you reflect back on this first session during the week ahead what was something new to you that you hope to remember?  
Is there anything you’d now like to know more about?

What are other means of grace, in addition to the two sacraments, that have been important for your faith journey?

#### A Roadmap for Session Two, November 12, 2023

- Introductions – Have you been baptized? When and how?
- Quick Review - Sacraments
  - Means of Grace
    - Augustine of Hippo at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century said “the sacraments are a visible action that represents and actually imparts God’s grace.” Or more simply that they are an outward sign of an inward grace.
    - Channels through which we receive the undeserved and unlimited love of God.
  - Instituted by Christ – Jesus intentionally told us to do these two things and these are the ways in which God has decided to work.
- What does God do in Baptism?
  - Forgiveness
  - Named, claimed, and marked – belonging to God
  - Initiation into the Church universal
- The Big Questions
  - Why water?
    - Throughout the Old Testament there were times God commanded the people to use water for ritual purification as an outward act that represented what God was doing for them
    - Ezekiel 36:25-27
  - What about the water? How much water?
    - Didache (The Teaching of the 12 Apostles) compiled during the second century, in chapter 7 talks about baptism. It says use “living water, and if not living water then cold water, and if not cold water warm water, and if not other water.”
    - In scripture there are baptisms in the River Jordan, the pool of Siloam, and inside homes.
  - Why do we baptize infants and young children?
    - Prevenient Grace
    - Baptism is primarily about what God is doing and about what God says to us, and less so about what we are doing.
  - Why don’t we rebaptize
    - God’s promises in baptism are never null
  - Why was Jesus baptized?
    - Jesus was baptized to set the path for the rest of us; he steps in the water so that those of us who follow him have a way into the promises of baptism and have no excuse not to get into the water.
- Exploring our Liturgy

- Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the church which Christ has opened in union with the church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?
- As you reflect back on this second session during the week ahead what was something new to you that you hope to remember? How can you put into action this week the vows that we have taken in our baptismal covenant?

#### A Roadmap for Session Three, November 19, 2023

- Introductions – When was the last time you had an exceptionally great meal? What made it great?
- Has there been a time Holy Communion was especially meaningful for you?
- Quick Review - Sacraments
  - Means of Grace
    - Augustine of Hippo at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century said “the sacraments are a visible action that represents and actually imparts God’s grace.” Or more simply that they are an outward sign of an inward grace.
    - Channels through which we receive the undeserved and unlimited love of God.
  - Instituted by Christ – Jesus intentionally told us to do these two things and these are the ways in which God has decided to work.
  - We should approach the sacraments expectantly and go forth with deepened commitment
- What does God do in and through Holy Communion?
  - Meets us with the grace we need
  - Remembering what God has done in the past; opening for what God is doing in the present, as Christ is really present with us at the table here and now; and holding to the promise of what God will accomplish in the end.
- The Big Questions
  - What is the difference in names/ is there a correct name?
    - Holy Communion names the holiness of the gathering and sharing as the body of Christ
    - Eucharist comes from the Greek word for gratitude and emphasizes giving thanks as Jesus gave thanks during the Last Supper
    - Lord’s Supper reminds us that this is unlike any other meal, it doesn’t belong to us but God invites us to partake.
  - Why do some think the bread and the wine actually become the body and blood of Christ, while some say it’s just a symbol? What do we believe
    - Transubstantiation – the bread and cup literally change

- Other common views are Zwingli's "Memorial" and John Calvin's "Spiritual Presence"
  - Martin Luther's has been described as consubstantiation
  - For us it's more than a remembrance because we believe Christ really meets us here and now – the bread and juice are really the body and blood of Christ while at the same time remaining bread and juice
- Why can only the pastor consecrate the elements but anyone can serve and all are invited to partake?
    - The consecration, that is the special prayers over the elements that invite the Spirit to make them the body and blood for us, is reserved for those with set-apart calling and training
    - We are all called to be ministers and all capable to sharing and giving the bread and cup to one another
    - We do believe that everyone is welcome as long as they come wanting to encounter God
- Exploring the power of Communion through our Liturgy
    - That we celebrate Communion should make a difference
    - Make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world

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