

**Series:** Habits of Grace

**Sermon:** “Sacraments: Heavenly Participation”

**Scripture:** Hebrews 12: 18-24

Habits are the small decisions you make and actions you perform every day. Your life today is essentially the sum of your habits. How in shape or out of shape you are? A result of your habits. How happy or unhappy you are? A result of your habits. How successful or unsuccessful you are? A result of your habits. What you repeatedly do ultimately forms the person you are. When you learn to transform your habits, you can transform your life. - James Clear, Atomic Habits

*<sup>18</sup>For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest <sup>19</sup>and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. <sup>20</sup>For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” <sup>21</sup>Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.”*

*<sup>22</sup>But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,<sup>23</sup> and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, <sup>24</sup>and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*

[PRAYER]: Father, we know that all our flesh and glory are grass and flowers, which fade and fall, but your Word endures forever. So, find us here where the frailty of humanity meets the fulness of divinity in Christ Jesus. Send your Holy Spirit to His body, and fill the forms to fit our hearts for Heaven.

[INTRO]: Collierville tragedy: Is Heaven still local? (Hell certainly is)

- The contemporary disconnect between worship services and the concept of terrible awe has been devastating to the modern person’s faith.
- We’ve abandoned reverent ritual for happy authenticity, and then when bad things do happen, we reach for categories for them that simply aren’t there.
  - But that’s the single most historic function of worship.

- I. High Places
- II. Holy Practices
- III. Heavenly Participation

**I. High Places** – where sacramental worship comes from

18 For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest 19 and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the bearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. 20 For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." 21 Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."

Foreign - we forget that we are people who rush in where angels fear to tread.

- When bad things happened to ancient people they didn't say, oh, there must not be a God.
  - That's the psychology of a spoiled child.
  - Ancient people thought, of course, I must go plead to a higher authority about this.
  - The human experience is the same - eternity is in our hearts, yet all flesh is grass.

*"I wake sometimes in the dark terrified by my life's precariousness, its thready breath. Beside me, my husband's pulse beats at his throat; in their beds, my children's skin shows every faintest scratch. A breeze would blow them over, and the world is filled with more than breezes: diseases and disasters, monsters and pain in a thousand variations. I do not forget either my father and his kind hanging over us, bright and sharp as swords, aimed at our tearing flesh. If they do not fall on us in spite and malice, then they will fall by accident or whim. My breath fights in my throat. How can I live on beneath such a burden of doom?" - Madeleine Miller, Circe*

- Bringing all the terror and horror of life to high places, offerings for supplication and sacrifice in order to appease and protect, just as horrific and bloody and terrifying as those worst parts of life:
  - *"In our loss and fear we craved the acts of religion, the ceremonies that allow us to admit our helplessness, our dependence on the great forces we do not understand."* — Le Guin, *Lavinia*
- Worship has always served the function of re-narration – we take the individual events of our life and we cast them back into the context of eternity.
  - So, what happens on the holy mountain makes sense of all the terror of this world.
    - The nature and character of those greater forces determines our hope.
  - *"Then I could not help wondering what the watching gods thought of us, with our clever masks and our jokes. What we think of crickets, perhaps, whose singing we hear with pleasure, though some of us smash them with our heels when they venture into sight."* — Gene Wolfe, *Latro in the Mist*

*Where and how is heaven local?* The progressive revelation of high holy hills & moving from Olympus

- Step one, move to Sinai – Terrifying holy mountains belong to me alone. Come to me only.
- Step two, to Zion – I put my earthly throne in Jerusalem: a bridge between heaven and earth.
- Step Three, to Calvary – What happens there? The visible image of that invisible God – His terrible greatness is certain; unchangeable kindness the keynote.
  - Re-narrating the horrors of this world: We believe this is a world where great and terrible things take place, and yet we in an unbreakable covenant with the God who sits enthroned above it all.
  - He has made a way for us to dwell in those places where the tempest roars and the trumpet sounds and the terrible vulnerability of mankind is on full display – and to be at peace – feasting at a table in the presence of our enemies.
  - This shapes the practices of our worship, which then shape us to see true reality.

## II. Holy Practices – our experience with sacramental worship

<sup>22</sup>But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,<sup>23</sup> and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, <sup>24</sup>and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Worship – not just a show. Liturgy = the work of the people. Hebrew: work = worship.

- We have works to perform, even now. And they are in many ways analogous to those ancient works – there are ritual cleansings and festal sacrifices.
  - Difference: these sacraments were instituted by Christ not as a means of appeasement from humanity to God, but as a means of grace from God to man.

The Reformation – recovering sacramental orthodoxy

- Not Zwinglian memorialism - *It is appropriate that the sacraments not be empty figures, but that whatever they figure is really given: in baptism the efficacy of the Spirit is present in order to wash and regenerate us; the sacred supper is a spiritual feast in which we truly feed on the flesh and blood of Christ.* (to Melancthon)
- Nor Luther's consubstantiation (with, in, under): still focuses on what's happening on earth.
- **Calvin knows reality is about what's happening in heaven.**

Where does Real Presence come from?

- **Ephesians 2:4-7** - *But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*
- **Colossians 3:1-3** - *If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.*

As signs of the gospel, sacraments must primarily be things received; not performed.

- BAPTISM – How sinners get into the Church (22-23a)
  - Sacrament = Sacred life and new birth
  - *Baptism, like circumcision, is first and foremost a sign of the gospel and its promise, not of our response to the gospel.* Calvin, Institutes
    - Infant baptism is a deeper kind of immersion - swimming vs. drinking
    - We participate as witnesses and covenant partners
- COMMUNION – How Christ gets into His Church. (23b-24)
  - Sacrament = Sacrifice
  - A better word than Abel – not retribution and violence, but “my life for yours.”
  - *“The liturgy of the Eucharist is best understood as a journey or procession. It is the journey of the Church into the dimension of the Kingdom... which allows us to see the ultimate reality of life. It is not an escape from the world, rather it is the arrival at a vantage point from which we can see more deeply into the reality of the world.” — Alexander Schmemmann, For the Life of the World*

III. Heavenly Participation – what sacramental worship is

- The creed makes this connection for us: *He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From there he will come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy*

*Ghost, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.*

- 2 century BC - Rosetta Stone – Ptolemy V in Memphis - **The sacraments are like the Rosetta Stone of Christian life: they show us how everything else works.**
- *“The entire cosmos is meant to serve as a sacrament: a material gift from God in and through which we enter into the joy of his heavenly presence... Precisely because heaven is already present on earth, the moral lives of Christians on earth are to reflect their heavenly participation.”* — Boersma, Heavenly Participation”
- Just as the Word became the visible image of the invisible God, so also we have been given deeds which are visible images of invisible realities.
  - No one would say that Jesus was a mere symbol of God. He IS God.
    - In the same way, the sacraments are not merely symbols of what’s happening - they ARE participation in the heavenly realms.
- *The Sacraments are an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men.* - Chapter XIV of Book IV in Calvin’s *Institutes*
- **Heaven is Local** – if our spirits are present in heaven, and our bodies are present on earth, then heaven is present on earth.
  - We’re royal ambassadors for the Messiah who reigns from Zion.
  - And we know what to do because he showed us on Calvary.
- OUTRO: Dan and Lydia