

THOUGHTS ON THE SACRAMENT DURING A PANDEMIC

Lori Davis

The sacrament feels like a medical procedure these days. It's passed by men, not boys. I wondered about that requirement until I looked around the chapel at our scanty, socially-distanced congregation and found not one young man among them. Maybe not a requirement, then. Just a fact of life.

All the better, I think. Some of these men are doctors. They should know how to wash their hands.

They look like doctors, too, with their trim haircuts, their all-business-no-nonsense masks, and their blue gloves sending the scent of latex wafting through the air.

The job itself has become a multitasking challenge with strict protocols. One water tray with socially-distanced cups of bread. One bread tray for discarded water cups. The world is a very mixed-up place.

I feel very mixed up at church too. I come, I sit, I listen. Reaching out for the sacrament cup is the most active thing I do.

It didn't used to be like this. I play the piano and the organ. I sing. I teach. I speak. With all due modesty, I am good at all of it. I am usually very busy at church, and you can count on me to show up. I've never been in a ward that didn't love having me.

Now I do nothing, and I contribute nothing, and no one tells me how much they enjoyed my lesson because I didn't give one. No one is benefitted by my presence. No one would notice if I did not show up. Humility has been forced on me. If I knew how to give it back, I would.

A great many people are not showing up. Once we might have worried about them. We might have sent a text to say, "Missed you at

church! Are you okay?” Now we just assume it wasn’t their assigned week to attend. Or they’re immunocompromised. Or they worry about passing the virus to those who are immunocompromised. So many good reasons for not attending.

This has forced me to confront an unpleasant question. Why do I go? Why have I ever gone?

Is it because of faith? Or because of habit? Is it a desire to serve? Or a desire to have everyone recognize how well my talents happen to line up with the service that is (or used to be) needed at church? Is it because I love the people? Or because I need the people to love me?

Maybe a mix of all of that, and I’d rather not think too hard about the percentages. At any rate, the masked man with the mixed-up sacrament trays has reached me, and I am supposed to be thinking about the Savior.

I’ll bet it did not feel like a medical procedure when the Savior prepared the sacrament. There would have been no latex, no hand sanitizer, no antibacterial wipes. I presume he would have washed his hands. I doubt the water was tested by a water treatment plant.

It must have felt so ordinary. Just a man breaking bread, the most commonplace of foods. Saying some strange words, yes, but in actions doing nothing that was not done by everyone, multiple times every day. He gave extraordinary meaning to the most common and vital activity of the day.

I have always had trouble seeing the extraordinary in it. I’ve been told all my life that it is the most sacred part of our Sunday meetings and the main reason we come to church. I always nodded my head. But I have to admit that the sacrament has rarely been the highlight of my Sunday. I’m more likely to feel the Spirit during the music, or the speakers, or even just while talking to someone in the hallway.

At the start of the pandemic, the bishop called. He suggested I ask my ministering brother to bring me the sacrament. But I didn’t.

Back then, the whole shutdown was supposed to last just a couple of weeks. Not a big deal to skip the sacrament for a couple of weeks. Besides, I reasoned, my ministering brother is willing and wonderful but also elderly. I wouldn't want to expose him to the virus.

Actually, I didn't ask because I was frustrated that I needed to. A couple of years ago my husband was in the bishopric. Now he is very, very inactive. Among other difficulties, I now feel the sting of being a woman in the Church. I had never particularly resented not holding the priesthood, probably because I always had easy, comfortable access to someone who did. Now I don't.

It occurred to me to bless the sacrament myself. After all, the words "having authority" do not appear in those prayers. I never did do it though. Mostly because I couldn't figure out how to explain it to my daughter. Instead we just went without for five months.

I wondered whether it would seem more significant when I returned to church. Would the sacrament suddenly become extraordinary?

I once heard a talk by Truman Madsen, who was a professor of philosophy at BYU. He talked about the sacrament as a spiritual feast and compared the role of the priesthood holders who prepare and pass the bread and water to that of a woman preparing the family dinner, saying:

You faithful sisters, married or unmarried, who move daily . . . from the garden plot to the crucial minutia of food labels to the cups and measures of cookery; you, who struggle and preside in the kitchen and keep vigil; you, who reach out to the perennial needs of your family and loved ones; you, who with artistry gather flowers and turn an ordinary table into an altar that summons prayer and thanksgiving; you, who by your very presence, turn eating into a feast—into dining in the name of the Lord, and who, therefore, bring a bountiful measure of grace to your table, lend your faith to boys and sometimes inept men who officiate at the sacrament table. Let the tables turn on your serving. Lend your faith to our trying to act as you do in Christlike dignity. For

this is as close as we may ever come to your divine calling to give and to nurture life itself.¹

I think I'm on pretty firm ground when I suggest that Dr. Madsen may never have been in charge of putting family dinner on the table. It's really not a spiritual experience. Ask any mother and many modern fathers. They know exactly what I'm talking about.

There's the never-ending chore of choosing a recipe and hoping you own the ingredients. Somehow you always have less time than the recipe requires. If you've got young kids, they're clinging to your legs and screaming while you're trying to juggle hot pans and sharp knives. If you've got older kids, they're either underfoot demanding why you haven't done their laundry or they're suspiciously absent when they ought to be helping. If and when the meal is ready, you have to herd the family to the table like so many unwilling sheep. Each additional mouth exponentially increases the likelihood that someone will feel called upon to tell you that the food is unfit for their consumption. And when it's all over, you are the only one who cares that the kitchen is a mess.

Grace and Christlike dignity are not always present in abundance.

But upon further reflection I think all that mundane struggle just enhances Madsen's analogy. The Atonement was not a clean business. It involved blood and sweat and tears. It involved a Savior who didn't want to do this, begged his Father to find another way, and was denied. It involved apostles who should have stayed awake to help but didn't. It involved betrayal. It involved people then and now who absolutely reject Christ's infinite gift, and even more who don't reject it outright but just can't be bothered to fully accept it. And even when some people

1. Truman G. Madsen, "The Savior, the Sacrament, and Self-Worth" (presented at BYU Women's Conference, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, Apr. 29, 1999), available at https://womensconference.byu.edu/sites/womensconference.ce.byu.edu/files/madsen_truman.pdf.

do accept his sacrifice and are washed clean, the residual consequences of past sins are often still there, making a mess of their lives.

None of that means the Atonement wasn't worth doing.

A family is nourished and sustained by the evening meal, even when they fail to appreciate it. Even when it feels so ordinary that no one thinks to thank the person who made it happen. The sacrament is the most physical reminder of the Atonement that we have. Perhaps it has nourished and sustained me, although I never realized it.

The water tray has arrived, this time with actual water in the cups. I drink it down, and it feels cool and soothing. Maybe not extraordinary. But soothing.

In such a mixed-up world, I will take soothing. I will take ordinary. And I am glad to be here.

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“water,”
20” x 26”, oil on canvas,
by Ron Richmond