

# EXPLORING OUR FAITH

## A Walk Through the Sunday Service Session 18 – What Is a Sacrament?

*This is an installment in a series, adapted from notes in the Sunday bulletins at St. Andrew's, that is exploring our Sunday worship. What we do. How and why we do it. History, theology, the way worship connects us with the mystery of God in Jesus Christ. Questions and comments are welcome.*

**Sacramental worship.** This week we move into an exploration of the second half of the Eucharist liturgy. The first half bears the title “The Word of God” in the Book of Common Prayer; the second half is titled “The Holy Communion.” As those titles suggest, as we move into exploring this second half we move from talking mostly about words to talking mostly about actions and symbols. So we begin with examining what a sacrament is, because the Holy Communion is sacramental worship.

The Prayer Book tells us that “sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace,” and that they “are given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive grace.” (BCP p. 857) There’s a lot of heavy theology behind those words, and indeed somewhat varied views on how to understand their classic definition. But the word sacrament itself gives us a starting point. It comes from the two Latin words meaning “make” and “holy.” The key here is that sacraments *make something happen*. This is the meaning of their being “sure and certain means by which we receive grace.” Grace is “God’s favor towards us” by which God “forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, sits our hearts, and strengthens our wills.”

**Symbols.** That “making something happen” occurs through *symbolic actions*. The focus is on two material “Elements,” to give them their technical liturgical title: bread and wine. These Elements begin as symbols of something beyond themselves: “our selves, our souls and bodies” as Rite I puts it. In the course of the Holy Communion liturgy, these Elements make a symbolic journey of transformation: from us to Altar, from our lives to incorporation in the life of Jesus and back to us. Through offering, thanksgiving, blessing, breaking, and finally sharing, the Elements come back to us as we share the Gifts, now constituting the Body and Blood of Christ – making us his Body sent forth into the world.

**Participation, incorporation, transformation.** Notice in all this that the symbolic action does not just take place “up there”; it also takes place in our hearts and minds, and in our physical bodies. A sacrament, in other words, is an action by which God draws us into the being of Jesus Christ.