



Christian Community as Sacrament

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Over time, I have learned two things about my religious quest: First of all, that it is God who is seeking me, and who has myriad ways of finding me. Second, that my most substantial changes, in terms of religious conversion, come through other people. Even when I am convinced that God is absent from my life, *others have a way of suddenly revealing God's presence.*

—Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace* (emphasis added)

I. "ALL THE LONELY PEOPLE": AN INTRODUCTION

SPRING 1999. IT WAS THE MONDAY MORNING FOLLOWING HOLY WEEK AND ITS Resurrection. I was making my way through the Center for Campus Ministry at Montana State University (the Christus Collegium) to my office. As I walked through the chapel, I saw a young man stooped forward in a chair—loneliness his only companion, looking like anything but Easter. Yes, the stone had been rolled away; but by the looks of things, one might have thought that it had rolled right over the top of this poor fellow! And so we sat together in a solidarity of silence.

His failed suicide the night before had now brought him to this special place,

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Christian community bears the presence of Christ. In Christian community one finds the forgiveness of sins. These are the marks of a sacrament.

nay, a special people called the Christus Collegium (“Community in Christ”)—a place, a people, where he had been invited and welcomed to worship during the preceding fall, because one friend had said to another: “Come and see” (John 1:46). And although he had come to worship only a couple of times during the academic year, those times had been sufficient for him to gain a strong sense of connectedness, a presence: where the silent frailty of all mortal flesh was given a resounding word of affirmation and forgiveness, and the feelings of being down-and-out were lifted up and gathered into God’s loving embrace by sacraments of healing and hope—through human fellowship.

“Mark” was a grad student in the college of engineering. But all he could calculate anymore were *xs*—unknown variables. “Mark,” I asked, “can you tell me what you’re thinking or feeling right now?” He sighed, “Dunno.” I placed my hand on his shoulder. “Have you eaten anything yet today?” A long pause...and then Mark replied, “Dunno. Maybe, like a potato yesterday.” “Have you been able to sleep?” I asked. Again came the response, “Dunno.” Silence. “Mark, I think that together we can work things out. Try to tell me what it is that’s bothering you. We’ll go from there together, OK?” Another couple of minutes of silence drifted by. Another sigh. And then one solitary sentence: “I’m, like, just so alone, and nobody really cares.”

“That sounds pretty alone to me, too,” I responded. “Yeah,” said Mark, trembling. “Like, I’m even afraid to go back to my apartment. Something’s following me. Demons or somethin’. I dunno. I woke up last night choking on my fist. Then I did a six pack and some dope. Pretty dopey, huh?” he said with a slight smirk. And then Mark put his hand on my shoulder, too. Our two arms now beginning to bridge the distance between us. And then we prayed together.

“Don’t feel so alone anymore,” said Mark. And an old song lyric from the Beatles’ “Eleanor Rigby” began to play in my mind: “All the lonely people, where do they all come from? All the lonely people, where do they all belong?”

II. THE CHURCH IS THE PLACE WHERE SOME-BODY...

“I’m, like, just so alone, and nobody really cares.” Something about Mark’s words sent me back to my beginnings in campus ministry and forward into a proposal for the future.

Back to some beginnings

When I first began as a campus pastor at Montana State University in the fall of 1995, mindful of Tillich’s dictum, “Don’t offer answers to questions that aren’t asked!”¹ I gathered a cross section of the student body: fourteen men and women, traditional and non-traditional in age, American and international, churched and unchurched, to compose a questionnaire. We mailed it to some 405 identified Lutheran students, asking four basic questions, the third of which was: “What is most

¹Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957) 13.

important to you in a worship service; that is to say, what would bring you back to participate each week?” Among the 263 returns there were a great variety of responses. However, there was a common theme. Consider the following random sampling of six responses: (1) “Having a group of people my age to worship with.” (2) “Communion.” (3) “Being together with other people and feeling accepted, part of a larger body.” (4) “Having a strong, supportive sense of community that really means something.” (5) “Being able to pray and sing together in thanksgiving to God.” (6) “An opportunity for friendships and fellowship that is tied to Scripture and Christ’s love.” (7) “A special time and place where I can come and know that I belong.”

Among the Eleanor Rigbys, the Marks, the sights and sounds of shuffling feet in the nursing homes as well as down the hallways of the dorm, or perhaps even in the lonely rooms of our own hearts, there is a cry for belonging—a hungering and thirsting for togetherness, affirmation, and community. In a time that I would characterize as “the age of loneliness,” one of the greatest gifts the church has to offer is the gift of community, belonging—in Jesus’ name.

Some five centuries ago, Martin Luther observed:

The Christian church...keeps all the words of God in her heart and ponders them, compares one with the other and with Holy Scripture. Therefore [anyone] who wants to find Christ, must first find the church. *How would one know Christ and faith in him if one did not know where they are who believe in him?* [Whoever] would know something concerning Christ, must neither trust in [themselves] nor build [their] bridge into heaven by means of [their] own reason, but [they] should go to the church; [they] should attend it and ask [their] questions there.

The church is not wood and stone but the assembly of people who believe in Christ. With this church one should be connected and see how the people believe, live, and teach. They certainly have Christ in their midst, for outside the Christian church there is no truth, no Christ, no salvation.²

Thus, according to Luther, to “find” Christ one must participate in the church, or, as the Apostles’ Creed further defines it: the *communio sanctorum* (“communion of saints”). As an earthen vessel, the church is the daughter of the word, the creation of the gospel—and by the power of the Holy Spirit, it pours the treasure of Christ out into all the parched places of the world, creating faith (2 Cor 4:7; Rom 10:17). Faith through the word, then, turns out not to be an individualistic principle, but a communal one. Edward Schillebeeckx frames this relation well: “Neither Jesus nor the earliest ‘church community’ constitutes the fount and origin of Christianity, but both together as offer and response. No Christianity without Jesus, but equally none without Christians.”³

²Martin Luther, “Sermon on the Gospel for the Early Christmas Service,” in *Church Postil* (1522), in *Luther’s Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955-1986) 52:39-40 (emphasis added).

³Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, trans. Hubert Hoskins (New York: Seabury, 1979) 58. See also Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951) 126, 137.

A proposal for the future

The reformers, especially Luther and Calvin, understood the church and its life to be identified in terms of “*the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.*”⁴ Note again these opening words: “The assembly of all believers among whom...” It is here that we need to ponder critically whether the Protestant tradition (with its special emphasis on the word as proclamation) as well as the Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions (with their special emphasis on the sacramental system) have lost touch with the incarnational, communal sense of the church—where, so to speak, word and sacrament come together in person, in Christian community that bears them as Christ’s ongoing body (1 Cor 6:12-20; 10:17; 12:12-27; Rom 12:4-5; Eph 1:22-23; 2:14-16; 3:6; 4:4-16; 5:29-30; Col 1:18, 24). In his typical hyperbolic style, in making an argument for the real presence of Christ in the Lord’s supper, Luther asserted: “Do not listen to those who say: ‘The flesh is good for nothing.’ Rather say, ‘God without flesh is good for nothing.’”⁵

And so we must ask: “Is not *verbum* more than *oratio*? Is not the Mass more than an *opus operatum*?” The challenge for us is to revision, to see with fresh eyes beneath the *sacramentum* (“external sign”), to the *res sacramenti* (“thing signified”), where the sacramental material—the water, the bread, and wine—comes together into the communion of saints that bears them, as “stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor 4:1). And it does so not merely as a sign but as a symbol, participating in (Catholic substance) but also pointing beyond (Protestant principle) to Christ as the “primordial sacrament.”⁶ Thus, as we stress the sacramental character of the church we come better to understand the sacraments not as “things” but as lively encounters with the risen Christ himself. Indeed, “the flesh profits” some-*body!* (cf. John 6:63).

III. ...SOME-BODY IS HOME

For the human estrangement that marks our time with so many sighs of loneliness—illustrated by Mark’s “I’m, like, just so alone, and nobody really cares”—here is the some-body, the body of Christ, “in, with, and under” Christian community. Robert Jenson makes an intriguing observation on this point: “Our society’s frenzy for the body is precisely frenzy for what we lack.” Jenson then brings the existential and the ecclesial elements together by stating: “The body that

⁴*The Augsburg Confession*, Article 7, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 32 (emphasis added). See also *The Second Helvetic Confession*, chapter 17, and *Westminster Confession*, chapter 25, in John Leith, *Creeeds of the Church: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3d ed. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982).

⁵Cited in Theodosius Harnack, *Luthers Theologie*, 2d ed., vol. 2 (Erlangen: Theodor Blaessing, 1927) 105. A major presupposition for this paper is the Lutheran formula: the “finite can bear the infinite” (*finitum capax infiniti*). It undergirds Luther’s christology, his view of Holy Scripture, eucharist, and vocation: “[N]othing can be more truly present and within all [creatures] than God himself” (LW 37:58).

⁶Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, trans. Paul Barrett (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1963) 13-45.

is the church, and the sacramental bodies around which it gathers, are said in Scripture *to be the body* of the living Christ.⁷ Similarly, Geoffrey Wainwright concludes: “It is as men and women find, with the help of the liturgy, their ‘centre of gravity and value’ in God that they are able to orient their lives, *as themselves a kind of sacrament of the divine love*, towards the welfare of all persons created in the image of God and called to his likeness.”⁸ For all the loneliness, the hunger for belonging, what saving, healing grace is here!

In his classic poem, “The Death of the Hired Man,” Robert Frost gracefully describes how I picture the Christian community gathered around God’s holy word, as a living sacrament, a place where some-body is always “home,” where God and others are always *pro nobis* (“for us”).

‘Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.’
‘I should have called it,
Something [or some-body] you somehow haven’t to deserve.’⁹

In sum: The church is a providential sign and symbol, a mediator of God’s love and grace for a world where we can be at home. It is the heavenly body of our living Lord (in the present), which mediates the earthly visibility of this heavenly sign among us, until Christ comes visibly again at the *parousia*. We “should have called it” the body, the *pleroma* of Christ, which serves as a sacrament in the eschatological tension between Christ’s first and second touch.¹⁰

IV. WHAT IS A SACRAMENT?

There is a grave danger if one uses the term “sacrament” in such a broad sense that it begins to lose all definition and lapses into vagueness. A perfect example would be William Temple’s expression of “the sacramental universe” in his Gifford Lectures (1932-1934).¹¹ This sense that any visible sign is a potential sacrament is not a terribly novel idea, for one can find it in various degrees throughout the whole trajectory of Christian thought: from St. Paul (Rom 1:20),

⁷Robert Jenson, *Visible Words: The Interpretation and Practice of Christian Sacraments* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 25, 35 (emphasis added).

⁸Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) 409 (emphasis added). Paul Tillich offers this concluding crescendo: “Above all, sacramental symbolism is associated with the ritual activities of the group itself”; *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) 123 (emphasis added).

⁹Robert Frost, “The Death of the Hired Man,” in *Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995) 43.

¹⁰Drawing upon Aquinas’s *Summa Contra Gentiles* (4:76), Edward Schillebeeckx comments: “Christ himself administers all the sacraments; it is he who baptizes; he forgives sins; he is the true priest who offered himself on the Cross and by whose power his body is daily consecrated on the altar. But because [Christ] was not going to remain bodily present to all his [disciples] (*quia corporaliter non cum omnibus fratribus praesentialiter erat futurus*), he chose out ministers (for his Church) [until his second coming]”; *Christ*, 44-45, note 93. This is to say that God in Christ is the source or primary cause of sanctification Spirited through the sacraments—as the primordial or *Ur*-sacrament (cf. 1 Tim 2:5). We must remain clear about this fundamental point.

¹¹William Temple, *Nature, God, and Man* (London: Macmillan, 1951) 473f.

to Augustine,¹² to a limited degree in Luther¹³ and Calvin,¹⁴ to Schleiermacher,¹⁵ to Paul Tillich.¹⁶ However, if *everything* is a sacrament of God's revealed grace, then is *anything* really a sacrament? "Does it matter? Grace is everywhere...."¹⁷

Some seventy years ago, Paul Tillich made the observation that:

No other question in Protestantism has from the beginning offered so much difficulty as has the question of the sacraments, and no other has received such uncertain answers....Many ministers who are in a position to judge the situation as it really is remark with anxiety the "death of the sacraments."...It is today a task on which the very destiny of Protestantism depends.¹⁸

These are strong words. And they are still very telling at the beginning of this century, with its increasingly secularized and controlling culture of "thingification" (Heidegger), for a time now called "post-Christendom" (Douglas John Hall), a time where and when one must seriously ask: "Is nothing sacred?"

On the one hand, there are those who would argue on the basis of Augustine's proposition, "The Word comes to the element, and so there is a sacrament, that is, a sort of visible word,"¹⁹ that any concern for "How many sacraments are there *really*?...is totally meaningless"—for it hangs on the very definitions that can be endlessly and polemically proffered.²⁰ Granted, this is a valid argument. However, do we not at least have to begin somewhere, with some working definition of a sacrament, lest we really have none, and indeed, it does become (as Tillich warned) a meaningless question: "The death of the sacraments"? Does nothing, or does everything serve as a sacrament of God's grace? Is it strictly arbitrary?

On the other hand, there are those who would argue that unless we recapture the sacramental sense of all creation, then any sense of particularity of the sacraments is lost.²¹ But again, must we not begin with some working definition, from some particular standpoint, before we can ever have eyes truly to say: "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God"?²² For heaven's sake, and earth's, are we not, as the church, about the understanding that Scripture has something to say here, and particularly so, christologically?²³

¹²Augustine, *Confessions* 7:20.

¹³Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), in *LW* 36:11-126.

¹⁴Calvin, *Institutes* 4.14.18.

¹⁵Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion*.

¹⁶Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 118.

¹⁷Georges Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1983) 298.

¹⁸Paul Tillich, "Nature and Sacrament," in *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948) 94.

¹⁹Augustine, *In Evangelium Johannis tractatus* 80:3.

²⁰Jenson, *Visible Words*, 11.

²¹Cf. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, 121.

²²Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* 7.50.820.

²³Cf. Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1937) 47.

V. THEOLOGICAL WRANGLING OR A PASTORAL ROUNDUP?

I believe this searching, deep into the sacramental character of Christian community, is not mere theological wrangling but a very important pastoral and theological matter, affecting the “priesthood of *all* believers.” What I am hoping for is a retrieval and renewal, a lifting up for closer examination, of the precious gift that our Lord has called into being, that is, you and I, gathered together by the Spirit, as the church, as Christian congregations, in Jesus’ name. Luther gets at the heart of this precious gift of Christian community when he writes:

Therefore, when I suffer, I do not suffer alone, but Christ and all Christians suffer with me....Thus others bear my burden, and their strength is my strength. The faith of the church comes to the aid of my fearfulness; the chastity of others endures the temptation of my flesh; the fastings of others are my gain; the prayer of another pleads for me....Who could then despair in his [*sic*] sins? Who would not rejoice in his sorrows? He no longer bears his sin and punishment—and if he does bear them he does not bear them alone—but is supported by so many holy children of God, yes, by Christ himself. So great a thing is the communion of saints in the church of Christ.²⁴

VI. A CONSTRUCTIVE PROPOSAL: CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY AS A THIRD SACRAMENT

The Lutheran tradition recognizes two sacraments: baptism and the Lord’s supper. I would propose, at least in principle, that we recognize a third sacrament, namely, the church or Christian community. Now, before the word heresy springs to mind, it would be instructive for us briefly to review what Martin Luther understood to be the two distinctive criteria or marks of a sacrament: (1) that it contain God’s gift of forgiveness of sin; and (2) that it be instituted by Christ.²⁵

As to the first mark (bearing God’s promise of the forgiveness of sin) in relation to the sacramental character of Christian community, Luther himself witnesses that “the whole church is full of the forgiveness of sins,” that “every Christian has this authority to forgive sins.”²⁶

As to the second mark (bearing the presence of Christ) in relation to the sacramental character of Christian community, recall Jesus’ promise to the disciples: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt 18:20 RSV). It would certainly seem that Christian community bears the marks.²⁷

²⁴Martin Luther, *Fourteen Consolations* (1520), in *LW* 42:161-162. See also *LW* 35:53f. and Heb 12:1-2.

²⁵Martin Luther, *Babylonian Captivity*.

²⁶Martin Luther, *The Sacrament of Penance* (1519), in *LW* 35:21-22; see also Matt 16:19; 18:18.

²⁷During a recent rereading of Luther’s 1520 treatise, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, I found the following statement of Luther’s rather striking: “Yet, if I were to speak according to the usage of Scriptures [namely, to 1 Tim 3:16, where Christ himself is referred to as the *sacramentum*], I should have only one single sacrament, but with three sacramental signs” (*LW* 36:18). The third sacramental sign to which Luther is referring here is the sacrament of penance; but, interestingly enough, it has much to do with Christian community or the church (see *LW* 36:82-83, 86-88).

VII. CONTINUING THE INCARNATION

A confirmand once put the following question to me, which, in all its blessed inanity, has over the years encouraged me to recognize anew how Christian community—in spite of all its warts—bears an especially healing, sacramental balm for our time: “If Jesus had not been crucified, would he still be alive today?”

Theologically construed, we need to be reminded of the fact, drawing upon the language of the early church fathers, that the church is called “to *continue* the incarnation” (e.g., Matt 28:18-20; John 20:19-23; 1 Cor 3:16; 12:27; Eph 3:10)—for the incarnation is not merely a Christmas event!—and to recognize and act upon the biblical imperative that: “People are the words with which God tells his story.”²⁸ Or to use the language of the poet:

This is not the age of information.
This is *not* the age of information.
Forget the news, and the radio,
and the blurred screen.
This is the time of loaves and fishes.
People are hungry, and one good word
is bread for a thousand.²⁹

In affirming the two natures of Christ, the “accommodating grace” (Calvin) of “God deep in the flesh” (Luther), “in, with, and under” the church—joining together the material and spiritual, finite and infinite, objective and subjective, profane and sacred, immanent and transcendent—we come to see how we as a Christian community *are* the body of Christ (1 Cor 12). This is what it means to be a First Lutheran, a First Presbyterian, or a First United Methodist Church—continuing the incarnation of God’s “first love” (1 John 4:19) into a second, a third, a fourth, a fifth love. God’s affirming word comes through your affirming words, God’s embrace through your embrace, in Jesus’ name. “Each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians.”³⁰

And so, the next time that we are gathered by Christ’s Spirit as Christian community, a congregation, to “welcome [a child of God] into the Lord’s family” during the sacrament of Holy Baptism, or join hands at the Lord’s table and hear Christ’s life-giving word: “This is my body, given for you,” we ought to pause and look around us, recognizing anew the “bodies of Christ,” the family of faith, and give God thanks for this marvelous gift: *the sacrament of Christian community*.

Christ is still alive—in his body, the church. So when, with Mary, in times of loneliness and dismay we wonder where Jesus’ body has been taken (John 20:1-2), we hear this radical word: his Spirit has taken up residence in us!

²⁸Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) xiii.

²⁹David Whyte, “Loaves and Fishes,” in *The House of Belonging* (Langley, WA: Many Rivers, 1997) 88.

³⁰Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), in *LW* 31:367-368.

VIII. AN INCARNATIONAL IMPERATIVE

As we have sought to make clear in this brief reflection, Christian community as sacrament is an antiphonal event: it begins with God's healing word of grace that moves through the body of the church as Christian community and then resoundingly reaches out to touch the needs of the world. It defines a people of Pentecost who live between the eschatological tension of the now and the not yet of God's kingdom, praying, "Come, Lord Jesus." Thus, on the one hand, the gospel requires the sacramental community to be one of remembrance, to be "living reminders" (Henri Nouwen); but, on the other hand, this gospel word also calls the community to be a "living sacrifice" (Rom 12:1; see also 1 Cor 12:27; Eph 5:2; Heb 13:15).³¹

In the Spirit of bearing Christian community to the world in mission, as a "living sacrament" as well as a "living sacrifice," Dietrich Bonhoeffer reflects:

A truth, a doctrine, or a religion need no space for themselves. They are disembodied entities. They are heard, and learned, and apprehended, and that is all. But the incarnate Son of God needs not only ears or hearts, but living men [and women] who will follow him. That is why Jesus called his disciples into a literal, bodily following, and thus made his fellowship with them a visible reality.³²

The fullest, "once and for all" (Heb 9:26) expression of this dynamic of sacrament and sacrifice is given in the person of Jesus the Christ and his cross. And by the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ wings his way home to our hearts saying: "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:23-26; see also John 3:21). As Henri Nouwen reminds us, "Just as bread needs to be broken in order to be given, so, too, do our lives."³³ And so in the middle of things (*in medias res*), as hearers of the word but also doers, the sacrament of Christian community waits upon the word and its world, between Christ's first and second touch.

IX. SOMEWHERE, SOME-BODY UNDER THE RAINBOW

I can still smell the rain-soaked meadow of alfalfa and feel the cool breeze on that humid afternoon in southern Wisconsin, now some thirty-five years ago. My dairy farming grandfather and I had taken a break from baling hay. Grandpa lifted me high up onto a green and yellow John Deere tractor. With me sitting upon his lap, we set our sight on the horizon, signed by a beautiful rainbow. This mem-

³¹In a recent article by Kathryn Tanner, this embodied, "incarnational imperative" finds a theological-ethical grounding in the creative use of a spatial metaphor: "Action is the proper response to a world that is not the way it should be, because, although human action does not bring about *life in God* (that is God's unconditional gift to us), human action of a certain sort is what life in God requires of us. Only one way of living in this world—living so as to counter suffering, oppression, and division—corresponds to *life in God*, achieved in Christ. *Life in God* is not inactive then....[It] calls for a certain way of living as a *sign* of one's willing entrance into the realm of God's life-giving being." Kathryn Tanner, "Eschatology without a Future?" in *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*, ed. John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000) 23 (emphasis added). See also Robert Jenson, "The Sacraments," in *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 2, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 310; Underhill, *Worship*, 57-58.

³²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller (New York: Macmillan Paperbacks, 1963) 277.

³³Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 88.

ory has seeped deeply into all the pores of my life. And I can still hear my grandfather's voice, "Long time ago, Johnny, long before nothin' was nothin' and somethin' was somethin', there was God. And God in all of God's love just poured himself out—couldn't contain himself—pouring into being a marvelous creation. And God reached deep down into his Osh-Kosh, B'Gosh bibbed overalls and pulled out the sun and moon, and then spangled the galaxious night with stars. And some of those stars are still 'dipping,' Johnny, reminding us of God's outpouring love for all creation." Grandpa, with those big, strong farming hands then squeezed my shoulders. That was my signal to say: "That's amazing!"

"Then God rubbed his hands together, Johnny, and like some rabbit out of a hat there appeared the earth—with oceans and mountains, flowers and trees—and with his fingernail he created craters and grand canyons. And oh, speaking of rabbits, God then created all sorts of critters—big and small. And God loved them all." I turned to look over my shoulder at Grandpa, and I could see heaven twinkling in his eye. Then came the squeeze. And I said: "That's amazing!"

Grandpa continued. And so did God. "Well, then, Johnny, God stooped down really low to the earth and began to form something very special out of the dust. God was certainly taking his 'time' with this part of creation [a playful twist with Augustine here]. Curious, the critters gathered round: giraffes were straining their necks, the elephants—as always—were a bit noseey, and then there was an occasional giggle from a hyena.

"But then," said Grandpa, "all was silent, as God lifted that dust up into his cupped hands and breathed life into it. Dust alive! Man alive! So amazing, so that the universe would have something to talk through, for God to talk with, and the rest of us—well, hah, to gossip about! And you are the only one like you, Johnny, in all the world, in the whole universe. And God has chosen you as his special child from all eternity. Johnny, when God made you, the cow got so excited, she 'jumped over the moon!'" (Knowing my grandfather, he must have had a Holstein in mind.) Then came that big squeeze again. And I said, "That's amazing!"

"Yes, Johnny, too often we forget about the fact that we are very precious in God's sight. We lose sight of this. Don't hear it or feel it. There's a lot of hurt in the world and bad things happen. Lots of lonely folk. Think its most because we've forgotten who we are, or—better yet—whose we are. But if we can just point one another to things like that rainbow; it's God's promise, God's reminder of how he holds heaven and earth together." It was then that I knew that I was God's beloved, because my sacrament of a grandfather and his Bible story "told me so."

And as I think about this old, old story today, perhaps it provides one reason I was able to say what I did for Mark. "It takes at least two to Gospel."³⁴ *Christian community as sacrament.* ⊕

³⁴Jenson, *Visible Words*, 39.