

268 | Sacrament and the Mystery that is God
Project Zion Podcast

Josh Mangelson

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

Robin Linkhart

Hello and welcome to another episode of Project Zion. Podcast. This is your host, Robin Linkhart. And today we are talking about the sacraments of the church, and when I say that I'm talking about the sacraments of the church in Community of Christ as well as the Christian tradition as a whole. Today we welcome back John VanderWalker. John has a master of arching religion and his thesis focused on the sacraments. Welcome, John. It's so great to have you with us today on Project Zion.

John VanDerWalker

Thank you for asking me back. Robin.

Robin Linkhart

John has an introduction. I would like to give you a little bit of time to just share about you and help our listeners get to know you a bit better.

John VanDerWalker

Well, I was having conversation of the lady the other day and I mentioned that I was a beekeeper. It was one of our first conversations in our relationship, and she couldn't believe that I had been a beekeeper. So that's one of the interesting factoids of my life at age 13 I went to work as a beekeeper's assistant and, ah, nine years after that first opening of Ah Beehive, I purchased the business and operated a B business in southern Idaho for 17 years, pollinating millions of dollars worth of crops in Idaho, California and Washington. I'm a lifelong member of Community of Christ, baptized age eight, and I've held several priesthood offices and almost every elected office and the local jurisdiction. I've never been a women's leader, though I'm an avid fly fisherman. I've served on the boards of directors for fly fishing clubs, including president of a club I have instructed fly fishing, fly casting and fly tying. I've caught trout in 16 states, so I still have a ways to go, and I have actually caught fish in 20 states. I have quite a few hobbies that air too numerous to name. But if there's something that's interesting than interest may I'm going to try it. And I've enjoyed working with my hands my whole life, and I continue to do that. I have one wife, two daughters and four granddaughters.

Robin Linkhart

So tell us about your current assignment with the church

John VanDerWalker

right now. I'm serving his Mission Center president for Inland West Mission Center, which is Ah, one of the largest mission centers in the contiguous United States. We have all the challenges

that are associated with the church right now, and I'm trying to navigate through those and get my feet on the ground with what's happening now and and what we can look to in the future. So it's, Ah, quite a challenging job, excellent people working with me. And I'm really happy to be in this position.

Robin Linkhart

And I would say, John, that Inland West Mission Center, as well as being a big piece of geography in the contiguous United States, also represents a lot of diversity of different contexts and cultures and that in your role, you're called to navigate and being relationship with all of that. So we know that your thesis focused on this sacraments. We are really interested to understand, John, what brought you to choose that topic?

John VanDerWalker

Well, uh, when I was in seminary, I wrote a paper on marriage, and while I was involved in that study, I delved into the concept of Covenant, and one of my advisors on that paper was Barbara Howard and as I think about Barbara, I think it's it's too bad that the church doesn't you know, night people, because I think that Barbara should be called Dame Barbara Howard. She is a grand lady and a wonderful, um, help to a lot of seminary students, and I'm one of them. I was writing this paper on marriage and a zay was running. Dr Ass passed her. She gave them back to me with some praise on it, and then a quote. It was something like this. Looks like a good thesis project. Well, I shifted my thinking right there because I had thought since I was ah, a history major, an undergrad school that I would write a thesis on, um, the concepts of Zion in the context of the Manifest destiny Doctor of the United States. And, uh, everything shifted right then. I'm glad that Dame Barbara edged me towards the sacraments. Since I'm certain that the work that I have done in that has not only been beneficial to me in my helping people connect more deeply with one another and with the sacraments of the church. But it's also benefited the church in in some of the ways that that we think about sacraments.

Robin Linkhart

That is fascinating. And I'm going to get back to you on this alternative thesis topic, um, concepts of Zion in the context of the manifest destiny in the USA. Because that has a look that is a lot of potential to mine a lot of different concepts. All right, so you focused on sacraments. How long did it take you to write to research and write this?

John VanDerWalker

Well, I had been in seminary, has had signed up for the M A C M program. When I actually got into seminary, when I when I went to work for the church, I did not have a bachelor's degree. So I started. I started studying for my bachelor's degree in, uh, the second year of my appointment, and, ah, within three years I had a bachelor's degree and I had a three week break and went right into a master's program. And when I had started working for the church, there was no m a C. M. So I was focused on being getting the m a. R. By the time I got 43 hours into the m a C M. I said I'm done. That's can't I just can't do this anymore. I spent 10 years going to college and working full time, and I need I need to quit. So I went to the dean and said, You know, I want to apply these 43 hours to M A r. I got the approvals of my life supervisors, and,

uh and I had ah started on my master's thesis, actually wrote the thesis and a little less than three months I have a picture on my cell phone of the books that I read and used in my research. If you stack them one on top of the other there, about three feet, don't. Oh, um, so I I went deep into it fast and hard and ah, of course, I had been engaged in engaged in the work, you know, because I was church administrator had been involved in district leadership for a long time. I had thought about the sacraments for a long time, but getting really into the study of it, I pretty well worked through this in about three months.

Robin Linkhart

That is amazing. Tell me about it was I'm just picturing that in my mind and it's like I I want you to send me that picture with all those books because I'm kind of seeing a vision in my mind of being surrounded by books with the computer and papers everywhere, medals to take notes here and there.

John VanDerWalker

My original, my original draft, I think with something over 50 pages. And by the time we got done, it was in the 20 page range. I think I don't remember. But it was a way. We had a wide a lot of stuff out. I came down, I zeroed in pretty well, I think eventually.

Robin Linkhart

So I want to hear more about how you framed your research and also about what you discovered along the way.

John VanDerWalker

I guess the framework really is based with section 156 of the doctrine and covenants is the cornerstone in that section, the church was called to accelerate its its preparations for building the temple in Independence, Missouri. And, um, we were in. We were in that same section, instructed to take a deeper look at the sacraments. By the time I started work on my thesis, we had just recently added an eight sacrament Um a lot of people don't remember that at one time the evangelist blessing was not considered a sacrament of the church. It was just an evangelist blessing. And, um so we had we had added to the to the book, I guess, if you will, this eight sacrament evangelist blessing. And so to me it was clear that the church really was looking into the sacraments for deeper meaning and expanded understanding for the church. In that evangelist, blessing was interesting that that even the evangelist blessing expanded from this one time blessing that was recorded and stored in people's foot lockers and in their linen closets or wherever they keep their valuable things as well as the archives of the church. It expanded to continuing life blessing and and the evangelist blessing has even expanded more. So we continue to look to the sacraments and how they could be in the expansion of our blessing and also of our cohesion as it is a community. It was it was clear to me, like I said, that the that the church of being engaged and looking at more deeply into the end of the sacraments as I approach this project, However, I sense that there was something foundational that was missing something that was a key aspect that was not communicated or is being overlooked. My sense of omission came from being dedicated to the book of Luke, which are his gospel and the book of Acts. I felt that Lukes, telling of the story of the early church in

Jerusalem was trying to communicate something that was more than just a bunch of people that were gathering together, praying together, eating together, um, listening to people talk and and sermons. I sense that Luke was trying to communicate, that these people were bound in a way that was that was in a well, they were experiencing a mystery. So as I began to my study, I found that Mysterion, the Greek word Mysterion, was actually kind of the foundational concept that that the sacraments came out of mystery essay. As I began that steady, I got into the deep water sacramental theology, and while the church had published and people had read several books on the sacraments, curing there wasn't really much talk or there wasn't seen. There didn't seem to be a cohesive theology of sacrament and So I I started on that. And and I and I really got this sense that what the way we were looking at sacraments wasn't comprehensive enough, and it wasn't satisfying. Whatever it was, it was picking at my brain. So I started reading a lot of Theo theologians from outside of Community of Christ, most of them Catholic, Um, and most of them had either been defrocked or had been marginalized by the Catholic Church in some way. So to me, the guys that are being marginalized or persecuted for how they think about God and how they approach life in Christ that gave him credibility in my book because they were they were bucking the system. So I read these guys, um, I looked it, you know, the different ways that they were approaching sacrament. And I discovered this this theory or this idea called the primordial sacrament and course primordial for someone that grew up in a scientific household that his that, you know, been aware of evolutionary process and all of that. My whole life I heard this primordial sacrament, and I began to understand that there was a point from which all sacrament evolved and that really, really connected with me because it is more than just an intellectual understanding. It was more than just a bunch of guys sitting around and talking about Jesus, the story of Jesus. And hey, you remember that time Jesus had those kids around and he called him over there and he blessed him. You know, we ought to do that too. You know, instead of looking at the story of Jesus idea of a primordial sacrament, which is Jesus instead of that it was a the sacraments coming out of not the story of Jesus, but the person of Jesus, which would really connected me And and so and I even I was like, I talk about it now. You know, I get excited about it in this idea began to satisfy me in some way from that point. I learned that and was again confirmed in my in my soul that this study was needed for the church, that that we needed to do this as a community because I was studying with these other really smart people home who had written books. I was joined joining on a journey toward the heart of God. I learned that I was not. Not only did the church have sacraments, not only did the church have sacraments, but that the church was a sacrament. The definition of sacrament is physical evidence of unseen grace. And for me, the church is physical evidence of God's grace in the world. And as I thought about that, I began to think about the church as being bread and wine, which is the most familiar sacramental symbols that we use and that God has offered this bread and wine to the world. The church is the nourishment that God has set before the world. Now that is not to discount in any way other world religions, that air doing specifically redeeming things but for Christianity and for the Community of Christ especially. I thought it was important that we began to think about ourselves as its church, the body of Christ. As a meal set before the world, I really began to see that the church, the sacramental theology of the church, had to shift from looking at the individual rituals, which is basically how we did it. It seemed like a lot of things that we have had published as a church over time have been manuals on how to how to perform sacraments

and not so much how to think about him. And I looked at it. This is not a way to perform sacraments or to think about the individuals, but to think about the wholeness of sacrament, all of the rituals that we participate in, as well as our very being a sacrament and how that works in a swirl of God, Christ spirit, You know, God, that Holy Trinity and the church and the sacramental practices of the church and how that all works in this world of mystery. And, uh, in my thesis, I had one graphic and it was a of anomalous with all of those things churning around in it. We needed a theology that was comprehensive, and I do not claim to have produced that. I think maybe I got us the first page written, maybe the introduction or maybe just the questions that we need to that we need to address. Since finishing the thesis, I have continued to think I've written some for the church articles for The Herald and other things. I've taught about the sacraments and I've come to understand to an understanding for myself. Now I'm gonna say this just for myself. That begins to satisfy the longing of for a community is described in Luke's story of the Church poster Resurrection. I understand that the Covenant of Grace and Christ is not something that condemns those who do not accept it. Um or do not move into that covenant in this life, I'm a Universalist. I have absolutely no claim of understanding our knowledge about another life that is to come. But I do think that as we approach this covenant that God has made in Christ that and as we step into that, we begin to live our lives in the new way and our lives become new and that the eternal becomes present. It's not something off in the future. It is a present thing. I do not believe that God is constrained in any way. The gods grace is limited in any way, and therefore I cannot make a judgment that God's grace would be for me and not for someone else. I think it's for everyone, and it is empowered toward everyone, whether they accept that grace or not. And, um, I'll leave that to God. I do believe that if we step into that covenant and into that grace in this lifetime, we can live lives that are blessed and that are mostly blessed because we're part of a community, I think for me. I've also discovered that the blessings of the Holy Spirit that comes to those who have decided to walk the pathway in community of Christ or in community with Christ, no matter what denomination, are not only socially and physically manifest the blessings are not only socially physically manifest, but they're spiritually manifested as well. I have a deep conviction that the sacrament of baptism and confirmation, those two sacraments are important parts that symbolize the life in Christ. Through baptism, we acknowledged Jesus and our bad guys into him to confirmation. We acknowledge Christ in community and are baptized into community, and I don't think that it's possible to follow Jesus without following in the midst of community, a life following Jesus. Necessity necessitates a life in Christ, and then through the Holy Spirit, we're bound to one another in Christ, and I don't think that we think we've intellectualized some of this to the point where we have, um, build a wall that the that the spirit. I don't believe that the spirit has any any problem manifesting itself within any context. But the walls in our minds, in the walls, you know, in our souls dull the effect of the of the Holy Spirit. I believe that we are bound in the Holy Spirit and that because of that, we have to be obedient to one another. We have to be subject to one another. As a recent election ery text taught us and that we are part of the body. Our problem is it has all humans is that we can't all be the head of the body. We can't all be the tongue. And we can't all be the eye or the hand or whatever. There are specific things that people are I'm called to and that they have gifts for But we are part of a body and that this binding that we experience is a mystery. And I believe that is the root that all

sacramental theology and ministry has come from. And it was a route that was present a couple of millennia ago, and that is the primordial sacrament of Jesus.

Robin Linkhart

Okay, John, you have said a bunch of stuff that is just like setting me on fire. I love this. You kind of started at the beginning identifying that that mystery, that binding that binds us together. And we went on along with you, as you're talking about how you explored this, uh, sacrament topic for your thesis and took us through so many things Jesus being the primordial sacrament, the fact that as the church the continuation of Jesus ministry in the world, that the church also is a sacrament. And then the way you phrase this, um and as you as you talk about kind of your story of encountering the topic and going deep into it, you identify something that's tugging at your mind or something that's resident in you that's kind of pushing you along to go deeper and deeper. And but I heard you say, is that part of that was satisfying a longing for community. That sacrament satisfies this deep longing that we have that's innate within us as human beings, for community. And in the context of that sacrament is this life giving way of the internal becoming present with us the God becoming present with us. And then I just really was captivated by how you talked about about baptism and confirmation. So one thing you said is very familiar in the church, and that is were baptized to Christ. But I'm not sure I've ever heard anyone phrase confirmation as baptized to community. And that is profound. I mean, we talk about, you know, the gift of the Holy Spirit. Not that we didn't have the Holy Spirit with us before, but in confirmation we recognize that gift of Holy Spirit that's always with us. And you really and of course, your comfort your confirmed to membership in a denomination. So you're confirmed to membership in Community of Christ. And oftentimes the prayer of confirmation will recognize the role of community and the disciples. My those are inseparable. But I love the way you phrase Holy Spirit binds us together in Christ. And it is how you framed this discussion of baptism and confirmation for me just opened up really deep and new insight into the community dimension of the all of that. And of course, all of that is just resting on this binding mystery.

John VanDerWalker

So to expand on the binding part of the Holy Spirit is that, you know, the symbolism is and in the teaching of the church is that we recognize the Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of people long before there's ever a confirmation worship service, and they're the sacrament is performed. But the recognition of that is saying that I recognize that the Holy Spirit is it working me just like it is at work in you, just like it is in this community. And it is in that community that I am bound by that holy spirit. It is it. And I think that's what Luke was trying to communicate in the Pentecost experience. The way he told that story is that this wind blows through the community and they are all one together. Hearing in their own language is the things that they need to hear that air the manifestations of of the Holy Spirit in that community. So for me, it's not. It's not a stretch to say that to be confirmed, you know that the Holy Spirit is confirmed. To be present in this person is not a binding of the person in the Holy Spirit in the community, and it is only in the community that the fullness of the Holy Spirit, the fullness of God's will, can be expressed. Human beings as talented as we are, as individuals can express pieces of of the wholeness of God. But without the community, there is no there is no fullness. And frankly,

even with community, there is no fullness. But it's closer. Yeah, we can. We can achieve something together because not everybody's a hand out everybody's tongue.

Robin Linkhart

Yeah, I'm when you use the phrase obedient to one another. What, um, some of our listeners, the word obedient can be a difficult word. When I'm hearing you talk about that, it's similar to when we talk about being bound together. It's not about being bound together that represses or addresses. It's so claiming a connection that actually has a liberating presence in the context of our lives of as individuals and community and in that way obedient to one another's about mutual accountability that it's not, it's ah, it's a sense of choice of walking into a relationship that is compassionate and loving and accountable. So in community, we refine one another, even run it hurts, you know.

John VanDerWalker

So, um, in Ephesians in the letter Ephesians that talks about, you know, the being subject to one another and course, the literalists, Um, and fundamentalist we use that to create a hierarchy. But I think I think what What we would interpret the scripture to mean is that, you know, when we are when we're bound together in this in this community, we have to think about you know, how How do I behave? Um, what are the ethics? What are the principles that I am going to live my life by that we as a community have agreed upon, And, um and I you know, we have we have an opportunity to, and this is part of the repentance process in a person's life is we have this opportunity to look at ourselves and say, Okay, these these are the things that I am not gonna participate in. And, uh uh, so that's what I mean by obedience. We're not We're not subjected in a way that is oppressive. But we are liberated in our opportunities to be able to respond in a way that not only brings glory to God, it brings glory to the community and and it that she shows the true person that you are is as an individual. Um, and it reflects the power of the community through you, um, and the power of God. Because God is in the community.

Robin Linkhart

Well, it's like wise. It's not a demand or expectation of perfection. It's an invitation to be authentic and real with one another and to be willing to get up and try again. And it's, I mean, the glue that holds us together in community, as as part of this holy spirit mystery is, you know, redemption, forgiveness, confession. Being able to truly, honestly struggle with life and and to be able to hear someone say, I made a mistake and I'm sorry, and to receive that and to be liberated toe also do that when one needs to do it for our own times, of, of wishing we could do it over.

John VanDerWalker

And when you think about it, when when you when you come to that realization where you say, you know I goofed up there and I'm I really you know what? The most profound witness of the whole the whole situation will not be how you goofed up. It'll be a fact that you had the stature and the metal to say I really goofed up there and and that will be the thing that people remember. And and that will be the thing that really points to a community that is striving for

something more than just a bunch of individuals to get together and eat bread and wine together.

Robin Linkhart

Yeah, and well, and also the sense that as a community, we can stand together and say we made a mistake, which I think is profound. And of course, that speaks to healing the wounds of the world and systemic oppression and injustice. Oh, we could just go so deep into this. So I'm going to ask you another question, John and I know we have some questions coming up that will get it. Some of these different dimensions of people may be wondering about even now, as they're listening to this conversation. John, how have you seen sacraments play it? Transforming role in people's lives?

John VanDerWalker

Well, you know, I've had a wonderful experiences throughout my life. Um, in Sacramento ministry. My marriage was one of those I remember coming home from our honeymoon and went back to work. I had invited my boss at the hospital to come to our wedding, and I've been gone 10 days. She called me into the office. I put old man, what did I do wrong? How did I How did I not tell her I'd be gone for 10 days? Something's hair terribly wrong because you never get called into the boss's office, you know? And ah, she told me to sit down and then I knew I was really in trouble and she said, I want to talk to you about your wedding And I said, Okay, she says that was the first wedding I've ever been to, where I experienced worship and what she was. And she was a Methodist. And what she was saying to me was that she had encountered the divine. So, you know, that was kind of like the foundational experience for me. But I remember once I was when I was working in the Western field, I was in Alaska and I was staying with a group of with a congregation at a retreat that we were having on at a state park by a river and the purpose of our retreat was to fill the freezer full of salmon. And, uh, the state park was not a quiet place. There were lots of people camping there. 100 over 100 I'm sure. So it was not a tranquil, serene place. There was a lot of kids running around playing, having fun. Just it was it was a lively, lively community there. And, um, on Sunday morning, we had decided that we would we would have comedian had a screen tent that was, you know, to keep the bugs out. And as and we tend to give us a little bit of shade and we were in that we're on our lawn chairs are communion table Had, I think tea towels over it and the table was actually 100 court igloo cougar that had salmon in it. And as we we're in that in that communion experience, I, uh I just had this sense that God was focused on us. And as I looked out of the tent, which was the only only thing separating us from the from the outside world was this screen that you could see through almost like glass. And, uh, I could see that the rest of the community there was honoring us. Bye. Not, you know, running past yelling and doing those kinds of things, but also that we were being a witness of something that was maybe unexpected, but was something that was needed in that place. And I just had this sense that God was really there, and God was with us. And it was a very meaningful service for me, as it was for others who, frankly, during the summer in Alaska, a lot of things just don't happen. And one of those things is community worship because of the, you know, the need for people to be doing the things that they need to do all the sun shines. So, you know, that was just a this connection with the divine in a place

that was unusual. Another time I had been traveling around the Western feel. This was while I was still working in Alaska, but I was in California for, ah, weekend learning experience, and I had had taught the class I was ill. It was at the end of a run of about 10,000 miles of travel around the western U s I had taking back several things together, looped him all together to make just one big trip out of it That would conserve. Resource is. And, um, I have been teaching this class, and I was just out of gas and we're sitting at the table what I called decompression, which is something I always build in tow. In my time help people have an opportunity to just kind of talk and ask questions and weakened. We could work through the things that maybe we're troubling them or some things that they were excited about, that they wanted to kind of shake her with a group. And since I was so tired and not feeling well, we had a worship service, all planned communion service, all planned. It had, you know, props that had things that we were going to be getting out, and I just I just did not have the energy to do it. So I asked the people that were involved if they could get the bread and the wine, some cups and napkins and and my Bible and I read to them, um, Paul's account or his rendition of the Lord's Supper from First Corinthians 11. And as we shared that meal together, I had this experience that the whole focus of all creation was on that table. We were at a plastic table with no tablecloth on it. We were eat bread right out of the package. The great juice was poured out of a Welsh is six ounce juice bottle. And yet I had this sense that the entire focus of all creation was on us. And I don't remember what people shared because I just kind of opened it up to sharing. Um, But I do remember this sense that as the body of Christ, we were not only consuming bread and wine that represented Jesus, but we were also Jesus to this world. And I heard people talk about how important they thought the church was in their life and how much they wanted to help this world be a better world as their response to Christ. And so for me, it was just this kind of this transformative experience that will stick in my mind, you know, forever. I see the faces of those people and I see the things that they have done and continue to do in the life of the church. And, uh, hopefully that little sacramental experience had had a part of that.

Robin Linkhart

Thank you, John, for sharing those memories. As you're talking on many of the situations you describe. There's this sense of the world all around us in the in Alaska, where you could see through the screen, the the community outside, also camping a sense of the world were called to serve when you were sitting in a very humble Brad out of the bag juice just poured plastic table and being called to that world beyond us. John. How are sacraments relevant in that world? How are sacraments relevant to our world today in the 21st century?

John VanDerWalker

I'm going to restate the question and just change just a fraction of of two. How how is sacrament relevant in the world today? You know, I as I think, about our past experience with sacraments, I think about how we kind of slice and dice and we talk about these things. But I think that the relevancy of of the of the sacraments are that they are a hole, that they are part of a whole, um, that they represent God's grace in specific ways in the life of the church. It is a holistic sacrament is a holistic understanding of ourselves as a people and the sacraments express in a holistic way. God's desired, to be inserted into our lives in a way that that brings us blessing and wholeness as individuals and as a community. So I think in this time of extreme

fracture, Western democracies are crumbling. Our political division is rampant. Um, our communities are are fractured because of the way that we live our lives in our homes because of the way that we work in Western world. Ah, lot of there's a lot of things, and I think this this holistic approach to life, to the divine to one another is probably the thing that makes makes it relevant to me. I discovered in my in my study that look in a sacramental theology that we need to think about the sacraments as this world that's going on in our lives together. I'm just I'm just so fortunate to have been able to do this and understand just a fraction of what the possibilities are. You know, I'm I'm confident that the sacraments have got a real purpose for us is a church, and it may be the thing that carries us through the 21st century and the end of the future.

Robin Linkhart

John, how do you see second sacraments or sacrament differently now than you did 20 years ago? And that, you know, as you talk about that, it might be interesting for you to also draw connections to the essence of things that have you haven't experienced differently or sees differently?

John VanDerWalker

Well, a cz we were talking, I thought about sacrament And how, uh, after my parents divorce and I felt like I was kind of cast Ah, I guess adrift how a congregation embraced my family. And, um, at that time, we would have never thought of that as being a sacramental expression. Um, that it was It was just, you know, neighborly. And yet, as I as I think about it today, you know, I got in the b business because because a man in the church said he needed some labor, and when I went to work for him, there were certain things that ways that we behaved that for this is how this is how you behave as a disciple of Jesus. And I see that whole experience of work of recreation of all of that, because I was engaged with people whom I went to church with a sacrament, the whole thing, all of it. Um, and I also see that my response is ah is a young adult, Um, my interactions with others. I see that now, as is the opportunity for sacramental expression, Um, that I was expressing through my own actions are trying to express ooh, my own actions, something that was bigger than myself. And I think if we were to begin to think about that is a church and his individuals, it would It would help us in our in our desire in our call, if you will, to be more more like Christ that that the way we live our life iss sacrament. So, you know, I I I now see myself in my responses to the things I'm called to in the church as a sacramental expression and that the sacraments help me the sacraments as rituals. Help me through those times when I'm sick or when I need a blessing. I recall my marriage and the sacramental acts aspect of that So it's all. It's all just kind of this part of the package. I'm not really sure what I don't see, but I do see, I do see this is being way bigger Then I ever thought it could be when I was young and and I hope that you know that others began to see that, too. On I don't claim any kind of ah divine knowledge. This is this is just something that I spent my time with.

Robin Linkhart

I think what you're saying is really important. And I'm recalling how much in recent sections of the doctrine and covenants our attention is drawn again and get and again too, going deeper into the sacraments of the church of generously sharing the sacraments of the church of

looking to them as aspects of life together. Then strengthen us not in and of ourselves alone, but for the sake of the world you were talking about, Um, after your parents divorce and feeling cast to drift and how a congregation embraced your family. And as you talked about, you know, becoming a living sacrament, which that description to me talked about a congregation that was a living sacrament. I'm reminded of this phrase that I've used often, especially after communion service, is that we go out from this place to break ourselves open and pour ourselves out on behalf of the world we were called to serve, and at the same time I'm continuing to be captured by this phrase used, used about sacraments, satisfying a longing deep inside of us for community. And somehow those two just danced together in this. In this mystery, I have sacrament.

John VanDerWalker

I think one of the one of the things that's really difficult for us in this post modern time is that we have such an influence of moderate modernity on us that we tried it. We try to pound things out, flattened down and get it so we can all understand it. Um, if there's one thing I could communicate, there's no understanding this completely. There's there's ways to think about it. There's ways to delve into it. But the mystery is always gonna be present, and the mystery is it comes to add us in many different ways the realization that a congregation acting on behalf of a family that's experiencing Brokenness as being a sacrament that you know that understanding comes to me just in moments of of of, you know, a reflection of my life. Wow, that makes a whole different. That makes the whole arc of my life change. That this sacramental, sacramental impress has been upon me without me even knowing about it. It's a mystery. Yes, Um, haven't having this idea that we can diagram it or that we can take things apart really stifles for me the opportunity that God wants to take in the common things that happened to us every day. The ways that we behave in our lives every day and the way that we worship. Bye bye. Just putting it in a can or putting it on a slide and looking at it with a microscope, we sometimes just erased the opportunity for God really speak to us through that mystery. Now, I'm not saying that we shouldn't take things apart. Look at him. We got allowed to throw it back in the pot. Let it let it stir around for a while so that we can really experience the whole thing. You can eat a mushroom and they're pretty good. If you put it in a recipe, then it becomes divine.

Robin Linkhart

Theo. There is a lot to be said for letting go of needing. Thio. Define and examine everything in black and white and simply resting in the mystery. Um, it's liberating and life giving all at the same time. Done, John. What are your hopes for sacrament in our life together as a movement as community of Christ going into the future?

John VanDerWalker

Well, you know, one of my hopes is to think about just what I just said is that we we need to understand how important sacraments are. The stories that I told earlier you know about the camp in Alaska and a plastic table in a recreation hall show just how portable sacraments are. We don't need a whole lot of stuff. We need water. We need wine, We need bread, We need oil. And we need hands. And we need words. And you know what? Most of that stuff you can

carry in your pocket waters a little bit hard. People look at you funny, but you know those things are readily available to us. The sacraments are very, very portable. They could be done anywhere, and we should take advantage of that not flippantly, but that we should understand that there are sacramental opportunities that have to do with the rituals that are presented to us all the time. I remember it. Ah, wonderful sacramental experience I had with a woman who was isolated from the church. And I happened to be going through about 60 miles from where she lives. So I decided to take a detour and go over and see her. And we had communion orange soda and crackers. That was our communion. And it was it was a profoundly important binding of us together. Um, I've never seen that woman sense, but it was It was a profound act and sacramental experience. I think that the church has a eight sacraments for a reason we have. We have basically what we're saying because these sacraments cover everything from birth to death. What we're saying is that all of life is encompassed in sacrament, that the life experience God is just longing for us to have a sacrament and a life experience. And these different rituals that we perform in the church show a pathway for an expanded understanding of and practice of sacrament in our own lives. and in our own communities. So you know, my hope is that that these that that that we will continue to look to the sacraments and that we will see in them a way forward into a world where Christianity is is diminishing. I think that we will see a richness come to us because of our devotion to sacrament.

Robin Linkhart

I am so deeply appreciative of the fact that our sacraments are open for all, um, ordination. Of course, you have to be a member of the church, but the sacraments can be shared generously with anyone who wishes to participate in them. John, is there anything that you want to say that maybe I didn't ask you about today?

John VanDerWalker

Well, yeah. You know, as as we were talking, I was thinking about baptism and how the church has has says something's how the church's policy on baptism has shifted. And I'm 100% for that. I'm just absolutely in favor of how how we have proceeded in the past couple of decades. But I want to say something about baptism. As as a is part of our theology of sacrament in the church, we should never as as church members. We should never be reluctant to talk about what baptism means to us as individuals in the community of Christ. And I think that if we had, if we had a kind of a solid base to talk, to speak from about baptism rather than just becoming a member of the church, which frankly disgusts me, that we talk about it in that way that people want to become members. And so, you know, one of the things that you have to do is be baptized. That we talk about it is as an opportunity for us to become more lined with Christ. And as we move from the baptism of water to the baptism of spirit and into community, we are able to bear witness of how important the community has been to us. As I have a little bit today, I you know, I understand the need for administrative benchmarks. You know, I'm actually the keeper of some of those benchmarks, but, uh, the reality is that folks who surrender themselves in such a way to baptism to confirmation are not really negating anything from the past. They are expanding upon it now. I'm not advocating that people should be re baptized. It's not my point here. What I'm looking at, what I'm trying to lift up is is to understand, uh, for all

of us to understand the depth in the profound mystery that is involved in in these actions and how they can. They can influence our lives over, you know, over a whole life. Sometimes we have, um, pastors. And you said, Well, you don't have to be baptized again, and and that is not to me is not the right response. I mean, we have these the sacramental writes in the church to express a bigger thing, and and I think that the bigger thing needs to be looked at and that how baptism and confirmation fit into that bigger thing. I have been baptized once in my life, but I revisit that baptism all the time, and I have reinterpreted it in my lifetime. And it is it means something completely different now than it did when I was a child, not less, not more, just different. And so I think it's important that as his church members, we we come. We become familiar with what it really is to be baptized in Christ.

Robin Linkhart

Thank you for those reflections, John, for our lister's. I just want to expand a little bit on what John is referring to when he says, baptism. Our baptism policy has shifted in recent years. Bad is acknowledgement. That community of Christ now accepts Christian baptisms that happened at the age of eight or later, and a pay person so chooses may acknowledge their Christian baptism and be confirmed. A member of Community of Christ, However, everyone may choose to be baptized and confirmed when they decided to make a choice for baptism, confirmation and membership in community of Christ. And I would agree with with John's observations that sometimes in our heartfelt desire to be welcoming and inclusive and we're talking about, how does one become a member of Community of Christ? We tend to try to make that easy and say, You know, well, you don't have to be baptized again rather than opening up the opportunity to choose whatever is best for each individual journey and and to share about what the Sacramento baptism means and that that is certainly an option, even if one has been baptized before. In another Christian tradition, I think.

John VanDerWalker

I think as we as we I'm sorry to cut you off, right? Fine. But I think as we as we look at it, it's It's the intimacy that we all really look for. We're looking for intimacy. With God on this is these sacrament sacramental rituals in our church are those ways that we e find that intimacy not only with the divine, but with each other. And, um so, you know, I think that that's an important factor in our decision making and the way that we actually present these things to people.

Robin Linkhart

Thank you so much for being with us today, John. You've said a lot of things that will really encourage as Thio reflect and study on DDE, maybe even go deeper in our own understanding of sacrament in the context of our faith and also a very special thanks to all our listeners. If you would like to hear more podcasts about the sacraments, check out episodes 112 and 120 Percolating on Faith, a two part podcast on sacrament Episode number 249 on God Shots 189 with David Lloyd and Episode 243 with President Scott Murphy on the topic, Sacraments in a digital world. If, like me, you were fascinated, and John's thesis says, you can find that in the Restoration Studies Volume 12 published in 2011 His journal article is entitled, "Look to the Sacraments", and John assures me that that is a streamlined version of his thesis, but presents

all the poignant aspects of that research that's available on amazon dot com. And we will post a link for that in the show. Notes. If you would like to hear more from John VanDerWalker watched for his episode in our series. What's Brewing Coming up soon. This is your host, Robin Linkhart, and you are listening to Project Zion podcast. Go out and make the world a better place.

Josh Mangelson

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