

In the ordinary, glimpses of the extraordinary

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For hundreds of years, Mennonite worship has been relatively plain, unadorned by symbols, rituals, and the formal liturgical structure of some other denominations. This simplicity of style reflects a fundamental Anabaptist belief: *true worship is found in knowing and obeying God's Word*. The early Anabaptists believed that church services should help people hear, understand, and act on the Word of God. They saw liturgical symbols as distractions that obscured the Word and lulled people into complacency.

In recent years, something has changed. Symbols and liturgical rituals are becoming more and more common in Mennonite worship, and many pastors and worship leaders are incorporating practices of other denominations. Given that the simplicity of

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Mennonite worship has been an expression of faith and not just a cultural preference, these changes make some of us uncomfortable and raise important questions. Do symbols and rituals belong in Anabaptist-Mennonite worship, or will they distract from God's essential Word? What is the value of symbols and liturgical rituals? How can we use them effectively? How will they change us?

Years ago, as a counsellor in a sailing camp on the Atlantic, I captained a small boat that carried six people. One night I was awakened

by the shudder of our boat as it was thrown off the crests of waves and slammed down into trough after trough. I climbed out of the cabin onto the deck, momentarily blinded by salt spray. Another wave caught the boat broadside and threw me against the shrouds. I tried to push back my fear with prayer, but the words that kept repeating in my mind were not words of comfort but

words of holy fear: Omnipotent. Omniscient. Unfathomable. God. In that moment, I understood God as I had never understood before, and I understood why fear of the Lord is a blessing of the Holy Spirit (Isa. 11:2–3). I recognized that God was everything that I was not. My terror mingled with a profound sense of God’s presence.

Shivering with cold and fear, I crawled forward along the deck to check our anchor. As I crouched in the bow, I looked out over the cove and saw that the boat captained by a fellow counsellor had pulled free of its anchor hold and was being dragged toward the cliffs. I was already at the radio when they sent up a flare indicating a desperate need for assistance, but all I could raise was static. I watched helplessly as the light on their mast moved inexorably toward the wall of unforgiving rock. I tried to pray, but the only words that came were those that had come before: Omnipotent. Omniscient. Unfathomable. I trusted God, yet I knew that I couldn’t predict God any more than I could predict the sea. God could save them. God could also let the storm finish its work.

Then the foghorn sounded in the distance, and a boat with a huge outboard motor emerged from the darkness and headed toward the cliffs. Thirty minutes later it returned, towing the sailboat. The dragging anchor had grabbed the ocean floor again about fifteen yards off the cliffs, and it had held until the powerboat arrived.

An hour later, the storm began to let up. Wet and shivering, I crawled into my sleeping bag, wondering: Why had the storm been so strong, when no severe weather had been predicted? Why had an anchor that had seemed secure slipped? Why had five young people come so close to losing their lives? Why had their lives been spared? Why had I been lulled into thinking that I understood and could control what I could not? My thought as I slipped into an exhausted sleep was one of the few Bible passages I knew by heart: “For as heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:9).

The sea and the storm on that night epitomize for me the power and purpose of symbol. Although I had an intellectual awareness

of God's infinite power, that storm drew me into the mystery of God's omnipotence and omnipresence in a way that words alone never could. When we use liturgy, symbols, and rituals in our worship, we do so in order to bring about what was accomplished for me on that night. Rituals and symbols allow the experiences of our everyday lives to draw us into the mystery of God. But they can only work if we know the mystery exists.

Unfortunately, in today's highly mechanized and domesticated world, we are often oblivious to mystery. Because we can probe the surface of Mars and clone a mammal, we think that we can know everything and conquer or control anything. We behave as if there were nothing truly beyond us, as if the words *unfathomable*, *omnipotent*, and *omniscient* described us instead of God. Like Adam and Eve, we have eaten the fruit from the tree of knowledge and come to believe that we are gods and God is just one of us. As a result, we look upon symbols as a way to add interest to the ordinary, instead of as ways to celebrate in the ordinary a glimpse of the extraordinary. If we wish to experience the true power of symbols, we must begin by recognizing that what we can see and describe is only a miniscule part of the reality God wants us to know.

Jesus said, "Unless you . . . become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3). If we wish to experience life as God intends it to be, we need to see the world as young children do, with eyes filled with wonder, and we need to touch the world as young children do, with imagination and love, seeing and experiencing reality on many levels all at once and never being lulled into believing that what we can name and measure is all there is. If we see the wonder and mystery all around us, we will recognize the tremendous gift that Jesus offered us when he used bread and wine, water and breath, stories and touch to invite us into that mystery. If we recognize the unfathomable, intangible nature of God, we will understand the wonder of Jesus' invitation to do as he did and use symbols as a way to comprehend and experience God's touch. If, on the other hand, we think that wonder and mystery are things we have outgrown, those simple symbols will seem trivial and overused, and we may walk right by the door to the kingdom which they open without ever even noticing it.

The theological reason for using liturgical symbols and rituals is that we realize the need for something that can bridge the gap between the tangible world in which we dwell and the intangible mystery that is God. Being tangible is part of what it means to be human. We do not just have bodies, we are bodies. Our bodily selves are our real selves. We have no way of knowing or communicating anything except by using our bodies. We have no way of

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understanding something if we do not hear it, see it, feel it, taste it, smell it, or imagine it in the language of our senses. Symbols and symbolic actions recognize that we cannot enter the mystery of God and experience the healing, transforming love of God if we do not begin with our senses.

Recognizing the value and purpose of symbols and symbolic action is only the first step in experiencing the intangible and expressing the ineffable. We must also pay attention to the symbols we choose and the ways we use them. The ways we select and use symbols and symbolic actions should

reflect our understanding of Jesus, who he is and what he did in his life. God became human so that human beings might experience God through their senses. The symbols we use should help us experience Jesus, and through Jesus, the fullness of God, by engaging as many of our senses as possible.

Jesus is divine. He is intangible, unfathomable, and unlimited. Jesus is also human. He is tangible, understandable, and limited just as we are. Because Jesus is fully human *and* fully divine, we say that his humanity is a sign of God. When we look at Jesus, we see a human who is everything that God intended humans to be. When we look at Jesus, we also see beyond him to the God who is otherwise beyond the range of our senses. Before Jesus came into the world, humans were only able to experience God's presence in ways that overwhelmed them, such as the voice on Mount Sinai that made the people plead with God not to talk with them. Jesus allows us to experience God's presence in human proportions.

It is in the person of Jesus that we come to understand that God uses physical signs and symbols to invite us into the life of

the Trinity. It is in the actions of Jesus and in Jesus' instructions to repeat these actions that we learn to use signs and symbols to invite others into the mystery of God and to deepen our own participation in that mystery. Our knowledge of Jesus should always be foremost in our mind when we are planning worship and incorporating symbols and symbolic actions. When we choose signs and symbols for our worship, we should pay particular attention to those that are inextricably linked with God through Jesus' words and actions. Symbols such as a white garment, seeds sprouting, or a pot shattered and repaired can help us experience

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biblical stories in new ways and provide us with tools to link our lives to the life of Jesus. Other signs and symbols can do even more. Signs such as food and drink, bread, wine, water, light, oil, and touch, when paired with the words and prayers of scripture, offer us a profound experience of the God who accepts, nourishes, sustains, guides, comforts, cleanses, and loves us.

Both of the above groups of symbols are meaningful because they point us to the mystery of God, but those in the second group give us an actual experience of that

mystery. To understand this result, we must once again turn to the person of Jesus. Jesus is not only a sign of God's loving presence; he is an *effective* sign, a sign that causes the thing that it signifies.

When parents cuddle a newborn child, the cuddling is a sign of their love. Cuddling indicates that love is present, and that the parents want the best for their child. But the cuddling of an infant does more than just show that love exists; it also makes that love a reality. Research has shown that parents must hold and cuddle their baby in order to establish the bond of love that the baby needs to thrive. Cuddling is an effective sign of human love.

So it is with Jesus. Jesus is the sign of divine love. He is the sign that God is one with us and invites us to be one with him. Jesus is also the means by which the bond of love between humanity and God is established. Jesus causes the union between God and humanity, even as the loving touch of a parent causes the life-giving bond between a parent and a child.

The most powerful and enduring symbols used in worship are those that effect what they symbolize. The water of baptism washes us even as we are washed by God in our baptismal commitment. The bread of Communion feeds us and becomes a part of us even as Jesus feeds us and becomes one with us. The touch of a person laying on hands connects us to the body of Christ that is the church, even as we are blessed with the healing and sustaining love of Christ. When symbols are used well, they allow us to experience a human truth that is a small component of a much greater divine truth.

Through the ages, some of the richest symbols for Christians—including the early Anabaptists—are the bread and wine of Communion. A brief reflection on the power of these symbols may help us gain a better understanding of the ways symbols can enhance worship. When we celebrate Communion, we hear the words of Jesus: “This is my body.” When we chew the bread, we experience food that becomes a part of who we are. We are able to feel through our senses the promise of Christ to enter us, be

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part of us, nourish us, and sustain us. Or perhaps we hear, “The body of Christ broken for you,” and we experience the breaking and crushing of the bread and our participation in it. As we chew the bread of life, we may experience the incomprehensible sacrifice and personal change that Christ accepted in order to provide us with what we need. On another occasion, the sharing of the Communion meal may establish a bond between people that makes us conscious of and responsive to the bond we share as members of the body of Christ. Each time we touch, break, share, chew, and savour the bread of

Communion in a spirit of prayer, we experience the unfathomable desire and ability of God to satisfy our deepest hunger, to sustain us, to become one with us, and to make us one with others.

Too often, those who plan worship search for new and exciting symbols, but when they do so, they miss the power of a symbol. I know my parents’ love not because they express it in a different way each time we are together, but because they continue to

embrace me as they did when I was young, and this old action sustains me in new ways with each passing year. It will take a lifetime to exhaust the power of a parent's hug, and it will take a lifetime and more to exhaust the symbolic power of a loaf of bread.

Every symbol that we use in worship should establish a connection between the world we know and the mystery of God. To have power, a symbol or symbolic action must have a meaning in the ordinary that can be linked through prayer and reflection to a similar but infinitely greater meaning in the extraordinary. A symbol whose ordinary meaning must be explained has no power to point us to something beyond itself. A symbol whose ordinary meaning is not at least a pale reflection of an extraordinary truth revealed in Jesus likewise cannot draw us into the mystery of God. (Imagine for a moment the ways replacing Communion bread with cotton candy would change our experience of what it means to think of Christ as food for the journey of life. Imagine how it might redirect our faith over time.)

The early Anabaptists rebelled against all the activities that had cluttered worship to such an extent that it was difficult to see and experience the wonder of what God did for us in the person of Jesus. They did not abandon the primary symbols that Jesus used. Today's Mennonites would do well to follow their example, carefully avoiding symbol for the sake of symbol and focussing on what helps us experience the mystery of Christ. Every time we use a symbol, we should ask: What truth about Jesus and what truth about our infinite, intangible God do we experience through this symbol? If we can answer that question, then what we are doing has a place in our worship. If we cannot answer the question, perhaps we need to listen to the cautions of our ancestors in faith.

About the author

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