

Seen and unseen

By [Martha-Lynn Corner](#)

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There are things about this life of faith that I like to think I understand.

Bread: this is Christ's body. We break it, we share it, we become it.

Wine: this is Christ's blood. We pour it, pass the cup, and drink.

Water and oil: With water, we baptize. With oil, we anoint and are anointed, and through both we welcome the Holy Spirit.

What is tangible becomes a doorway to what is intangible. (Visible and invisible. Seen and unseen.) As you grow up in the church, these implements mark ritual, and at first it is only the repetition you understand. Communion—this happens every week. Baptism—this happens occasionally, and we crowd around the font to watch the baby squirm. We stand, we sit, we kneel. We color pages and sing the songs and go to the room with the sandwich cookies.

That is simplified, of course, because the Spirit is at work even then, but as we age we begin to understand the reason behind the ritual. And we see that it is no reason at all, but a flying leap at the improbable: the story of these Hebrews, recalcitrant and stubborn, and a covenant renewed again and again until the law gets trumped by a baby boy. And we focus on him for a while, with our pageants and sweet little songs, until at some point we notice that he has grown up and been nailed to the cross—swiftly, suddenly, within the space of a few chapters.

And the adults who have led us down this path are good and kind. We never dwell for long in this dark place, running hard and fast for Easter, but the shadows there on the cross and in the tomb are real. The world both inside and outside church ceases to be so black and white—we are teenagers now, college students, and the myriad shades of gray we encounter throw a scrim over the story. Sometimes we can't see it at all, and even if we can, we often walk away.

Still, though, there are bread and wine, oil and water.

Handling them, we handle salvation. We come to know that we are touching redemption, we begin to understand that we are forgiven.

We understand that these are gifts, and at some point (we are adults now; we have babies, jobs, mortgages) we begin to see what we give in return for these gifts. We understand that grace is free, but that living into this grace means reaching out in love.

Always love.

And: that there is no love without forgiveness.

This is where I am now in my faith journey—struggling to comprehend yet another dimension of the bread and wine, oil and water. These things I thought I understood so well hold even more uncertainty. I'm not sure where to go from here. I'm not sure how to proceed.

I am certain that these things I can touch contain within them the promise of the One who can help me, though.

There are things about this life of faith I like to think I understand. I will freely admit to being baffled by forgiveness, even as I am called there long and hard and strong. Clear as church bells.

Sounding above all else, this clarion call: in forgiveness, God moves first. Until that happens—as that happens—I will continue to touch those things I can see and wait for what I can't.

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