

Known to us in dirt and spit

The earthiness of Jesus' cure of the blind man in John 9 recalls all of the ways that God uses basic elements in creation and salvation.

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Occasionally, a student in one of the literature classes I teach will ask me how I know that a symbol is really a symbol, that I'm not just overreacting to something in the text. I always reply that we know we're looking at a symbol when the author comes back to it again and again. Then an image is meant to take on more weight.

[This Sunday's Gospel would be a good illustration](#) of this point. Again and again, we see blind people in this text, from the physically blind to the metaphorically blind. Again and again, the text returns to blindness. Clearly, we're meant to explore issues of our own blindness. It's not bad to do a spiritual inventory periodically. Where do we see evidence of God in our lives? Where are we blind to God's presence?

As I read the text for this week, I found myself getting to this point from a different angle. Look at how Jesus cures this blind man. He mixes dirt and spit (dirt and spit!) onto the man's eyes and instructs him to bathe. I'm not the first to be struck by the earthiness of this cure: the use of different elements (dirt, saliva, and water), the rootedness of the cure in the physical (Jesus doesn't cast a spell, for example, or call on angels), and the simplicity of it all.

It might make us think back to the Genesis story, of God forming the first humans out of dirt (Adam) and an extra rib (Eve). It might make us think of all the ways that God uses basic, earthbound elements in both creation and salvation.

Think of our sacraments, for example. There's baptism, the word bound with water. And the water doesn't come to us from some special source—it's not like we special-order it from the Holy Land. Well, perhaps some churches do, but that's a foolish use of money, if you ask me. It's not like those waters have special powers. The power comes from the word—and perhaps more importantly, from the words that the congregation offers. When we baptize someone, the whole congregation takes a vow to support that person—when you wonder why baptism is such a public event, and why some people are adamant that it not be separated from the service and the congregation, that's why. It's not a photo op. It's a sacrament.

Think about Holy Communion. I've been to many Holy Communion now. Some churches use wafers specially ordered from religious communities, but you don't have to do that. I've had communion with pita bread, with challah, and once, with a pizza crust. I've had good wine, bad wine, and grape juice. Again, what's important is the symbol of the elements, mixed with the words. It's not just about memory—it's how God becomes present to us, through a mystery that we don't fully understand.

As we work our way through the scriptures, think about how often God takes simple things and turns them into routes that can lead to salvation. The most stunning example, of course, is the story of the incarnation. During weeks where I'm impatient with my own failing flesh, I'm even more astounded than usual that the Divine would take on this project.

And we, of course, can work similar magic. Open up your dinner table and observe grace in action. Forgive freely and watch redemption work. Pray for those who would do you wrong and notice what happens. Get your fingers in the dirt and watch the flowers bloom later. Take some simple elements and envision them as sacramental, a symbolic route to God.

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