

*Sacraments and Symbols in*  
**THE BIBLE**



APOCALYPTIC DOOM by Vernon Nye, 1990 | ELLEN G. WHITE ESTATE, INC.

## Sacraments of Mercy | BY KENDRA HALOVIK VALENTINE

How is  
a body a  
“sacrament  
of mercy”?

The following is adapted from a presentation given at the School of Allied Health Professions’ baccalaureate service, at the Loma Linda University Church in Loma Linda, California, on June 15, 2013.

I am grateful to Reverend Nancy Taylor for sharing with me her words of hope at the Interfaith Service of Healing that took place four days after the bombings at the Boston Marathon. If you watched the Interfaith Service on TV or online, you have already heard her words. That Thursday, Taylor, senior minister of the Old South Church in Boston, Massachusetts, was the first to speak, and she said:

*Located at the finish line of the Boston Marathon, over the years Old South Church has developed a ministry with marathoners. They are a special breed. . . marathoners. They are built of sturdy stuff. As we do every year on Marathon Sunday. . . we blessed countless runners. Raising our arms in a forest of blessing, we invoked the words of the prophet Isaiah: “May you run and not grow weary, walk and not faint.”*

*And then. . . under a bright blue sky and in the midst of it all—in the very midst of a joy-filled, peaceful international competition—explosions. Chaos. Terror.*

*From the Church’s Tower, this is what I saw: I saw people run toward—not away from, but toward—the explosions, toward the mayhem and pain. . . into the danger. I saw people making of their own bodies sacraments of mercy.<sup>1</sup>*

That last phrase caught my attention: “bodies as sacraments of mercy.” What does that mean? How is a body a “sacrament of mercy”? Adventists do not typically use the word “sacrament.” Other Christians understand a “sacrament” as a “visible sign of inward grace”; something that possesses a sacred character or mysterious significance. Like the consecrated bread of the Lord’s Supper, a sacrament is something that holds more than we can adequately express: bread, but more than bread; a symbol of God’s mercy and Christ’s sacrifice. It is a sacrament. Marriage and baptism are sometimes referred to as sacraments. They are sacred experiences that hold more than we can adequately express: a mysterious significance; symbols of God’s mercy.

For Reverend Taylor, those running into the



JOHN TILUMACK/THE BOSTON GLOBE/



chaos were making their own bodies something sacred; something that holds more than we can adequately express. They were bodies, but more than bodies—symbols of mercy. They ran into the chaos and used their eyes, mouths, hands, and backs to show mercy.

Like so many of you, I watched the same video clips over and over: the runner stumbling to the ground because of the blast, the look of disbelief on faces, the climbing over the shattered bleachers to free people. I also watched the video clips of strangers helping each other—holding limbs together, putting pressure on bleeding gaps in the skin, reassuring frightened parents and spouses and children, getting bloody and picking up people with strength they did not know they had—“making of their own bodies sacraments of mercy.”

### **Elijah’s body as a “sacrament of mercy”**

There is a strange story in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) where a body was used as a sacrament of mercy. It was a time of great suffering; a time of drought and starvation, disease and death. When, out of the blue, a prophet showed up named Elijah.

At the city gate of a remote town, he met a widow who was going about fixing her final meal. Elijah said to her: “Do not be afraid.” Those words were life altering for her. They were words against death and assuring her of life.<sup>2</sup>

For sixteen chapters in the book of 1 Kings, readers meet ruler after ruler who did not care for the widows and the children; did not care that they were starving. Then, without any introduction other than his name “Elijah” (meaning “Yahweh is God”), the story changes. Suddenly a widow and her son actually become the focus of the narrative.

Later, when her son became so deathly ill “that there was no breath left in him” (1 Kings 17:17 NRSV), Elijah used his own body to bring life back. Elijah was unafraid of the deadly disease. Without hesitating for even a moment, Elijah placed his own body on the boy’s and prayed to God: “Let this child’s life come into him again” (17:21)!



In this scene—which, admittedly, challenges our modern sensibilities—Elijah placed his body between the boy and the powers of disease, the powers of chaos, death itself. Most likely this act comes from an ancient Near Eastern understanding concerning the transfer of life from one body into another “through a concrete gesture.”<sup>3</sup> It is mysterious. It is a sacrament of mercy.

Elijah’s strange action is also a passionate resisting; using his body as a way to shout “No!” to that which destroys human life. Again I am reminded of the people running toward the explosions. Before they knew how many bombs there were, they ran *toward* the hurting, placing their own bodies right there at Boston’s “Ground Zero.” They were resisting that which tried to destroy human life—“making their own bodies sacraments of mercy.”

What life-altering words did they say that day to the hurting? Like Elijah, did they say:

“Do not be afraid.”

“Don’t worry, I’m going to get you help.”

“It’s going to be OK.”

“I’ll stay with you.”

**They ran  
toward the  
hurting,  
placing their  
own bodies  
right there  
at Boston’s  
“Ground  
Zero.”**

**Often in  
between the  
healthy  
and the hurting  
are the  
healers.**

“You aren’t alone.”  
“Do not be afraid...”

These are life-altering words and actions;  
“sacraments of mercy.”

Scripture says that the boy “revived” and Elijah  
“gave him to his mother” (1 Kings 17:23). Imagine  
the mother’s amazement; the widow’s joy.

Hebrew Bible specialist Walter Brueggemann  
considers this story a critique of the kings who do  
not seem to care. There was supposed to be “justice  
at the gate,” but for the widow, the gate is only a  
place to pick up sticks to cook her final meager meal.  
In her world, widows had nowhere to turn; no voice.  
Not when they were hungry, not when their sons  
and daughters were sick.

But the prophet Elijah also shows up at the gate.  
Elijah representing another way, God’s way, showed  
up and acted on her behalf—a comfort for widows,  
a voice for the voiceless, turning death into life;  
making the gate a place of hope and justice once  
again.

## **Jesus’ body as a “sacrament of mercy”**

The story of Elijah and the widow is remembered  
by Luke, a writer in the New Testament. In his  
gospel, after Jesus proclaimed in his home syna-  
gogue in Nazareth that his ministry would be about  
preaching good news to the poor, release to captives,  
recovery of sight to the blind, setting the oppressed  
free, proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor (Luke  
4:18–19), it is then that Jesus reminded the people  
in his home church of the story of Elijah and the  
widow (4:26). Then, a few chapters later, in Luke 7,  
Jesus meets a widow at another city gate, the gate  
to the city of Nain.

She, too, had lost a son, her only son. The story’s  
setup makes readers wonder: Why is Jesus being  
compared to Elijah?<sup>4</sup> Is Jesus also a prophet? Does  
he too speak life-altering words? Can he bring life  
to those whose breath is gone? Does Jesus restore  
“justice at the gate”?

The description of the scene includes two large  
crowds: the crowd of mourners with the widow,  
and the crowd of disciples. In between the two  
crowds stands Jesus. In between the two crowds  
there is a man who sees the widow, has compassion  
on her, and speaks to her, saying, “Do not weep.”  
In between the two crowds there is a man who will  
give his body as a sacrament of mercy.

Often in between the healthy and the hurting are  
the healers; those who give their bodies as sacra-  
ments. Graduates, you know this already in the  
training you have received. Often in between the  
healthy and the hurting are the healers.

In a way, this whole community of Loma Linda  
University—the campus, medical center, church,  
academy, the outreach centers—this whole commu-  
nity can be understood as a group of healers  
standing between those two crowds.

Scripture says Jesus reached out and touched  
the stretcher that carried the dead boy. Jesus  
responded like Elijah of old, starting with life-  
altering words: “Do not weep” (like, “Do not be  
afraid”). Jesus was not afraid of the disease that  
had caused the boy’s death. He was not afraid of

