

Reclaiming Our Birthright ~ Sending Them Away Empty

Erwin Buck writes some beloved friends...

Dear Fred and Lois;

Greetings to you in the name of the risen Christ who becomes known to us in the breaking of the bread.

I don't think I ever told you about a particular experience, a good number of years ago, which left us with a sense of awe and wonderment.

It was on a Sunday afternoon in midsummer. After church we had had a nice lunch and then we laid down for a short nap. As we were drowsing off, I became aware of the children playing in the adjoining bedroom. Something in their dialog caught my attention. "Listen," I whispered to Gertrude, as I nudged her awake. "Listen!"

We did not need to go and see for ourselves. As we listened with bated breath, the words, the tender tone of voice, the unselfconscious children's liturgy said it all. The girls had helped themselves to a slice of bread and a glass of water, and now they were giving some of each to one another. "You were a bad girl," I heard the one say to the other; "but it is alright now. Here, eat this bread."

They were playing communion! How delightful! But what impressed me most was the girls' obviously intimate insight into the significance of the celebration of the Eucharist, which they had been allowed to witness only from their place in the pew. Where, how had they reached this level of understanding? They were only three and four years old and we, sad to say, had thought them too young to be taught such theologically sophisticated matters. Not only had they never received communion, they had never even accompanied us to the Lord's table. It was only years later that our church began to discuss the possibility of allowing "early communion." And by "early" in those days we meant a time just prior to confirmation —approximately at the age of ten or twelve.

So, how did the meaning of the Eucharist imprint itself on those young minds? I recall Professor Harold Floreen of blessed memory say that when our human structures become too restrictive, the Holy Spirit finds new and unconventional ways of asserting itself. Was this the sort of thing Professor Floreen was talking about?

We had debarred the children from the Lord's table, unaware that we had deprived them in any way. We had sent them away empty, in the conviction that they were "not ready," that they did not "understand" what the sacrament was all about. Was God now trying to get through to us adults by letting us overhear the testimony of little children?

Later in my ministry, I often had occasion to reflect upon these matters. In the large congregation, which had called me to be their pastor, it frequently happened that at the communion rail I came face to face with people whom, I was certain, I had never seen before. Were they visitors or "fringe members"? Were they even Lutheran? Had they at least been baptized, and if not, was it my duty to see to it that they be kept away from the Lord's table?

To be sure, our church polity was quite specific about the requirements for admission to the sacrament of the altar: baptism, confirmation, and faith in the "real presence" of the Lord "in, with, and under" the bread and the wine. To defend the exclusion of those who did not meet those requirements, we asserted that Holy Communion was "not really necessary." After all, so the argument went, we do not receive anything in the Eucharist that we have not already received through the preaching of the word, and through baptism.

I used to agonize a great deal about these things. How and when can people be expected to unlearn what they had been taught by word and by example, namely, that participation in the celebration of the Eucharist is an "add on?" How many, I sometimes asked myself, —how many stayed away from the table, feeling that they did not meet the (often unspoken) "requirements for admission," or convinced that they were not missing anything?

Those thoughts still make me wince. Do I myself really understand what happens during the administration of the sacrament? And if not, is it not a matter of insufferable arrogance on my part to presume to decide who should be "filled" and who should be "sent away empty?" But even more importantly, how can one proclaim the Gospel by sending people away empty-handed?

Our church has changed a great deal since then. We now invite anyone who believes that the Lord is present in the sacrament, to come and participate; and we welcome parents to bring their children with them to the table and to allow them to receive the elements as well. Nevertheless, it still gives me a twinge when I meet the expectant eyes of a small child who does not receive what the older siblings or playmates have given to them. Does she feel excluded, unworthy?

There is something special about a worship service in which men and women, young and old, come to the altar, holding out their hands in the confidence that they will be filled. As presider I am deeply conscious of the wonder of it all, and I am convinced that lay assistants count it as great a privilege as I do, to be allowed to participate in this holy moment.

As bread and wine are distributed and words are spoken, eye meets eye and our spirits communicate on the deepest level. Our faces exude a wide range of feelings from joy to sadness and from defeat to hope. But we all stand before God as vulnerable human beings who know that God's grace and peace reaches out to all and draws us all together into the one body of Christ. This is truly a foretaste of the ultimate fulfillment of Jesus' prayer "that they may be one as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." (*John 17:22-23*)

The peace of God be with you always!

Erwin.



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