

Reclaiming Our Birthright ~ Taking Our Celebration Home

Karen Johnson-Lefsrud and Jann Boyd write their church...

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

It is a gift to gather together on Sunday mornings and to participate in word and in supper in the riches that are ours as people who bear the mark of the cross. Luther, in the *Large Catechism*, in his lengthy treatise on the Lord's Supper, names the supper as our treasure:

...we go to the sacrament because there we receive a great treasure, through and in which we obtain the forgiveness of sins. Why? Because the words are there, and they impart it to us! For this reason he (Christ) bids me eat and drink, that it may be mine and do me good as a sure pledge and sign —indeed as the very gift he has provided for me against my sins, death, and all evils. (*Part V - 22.*)

This treasure is conveyed and communicated to us in no other way than through the words, "given and shed for you." Here you have both —that it is Christ's body and blood and that they are yours as your treasure and gift. Christ's body cannot be an unfruitful, useless thing that does nothing and helps no one. (*Part V - 29.*)

It is straightforward to comprehend Luther's words when we are well and able-bodied, able to attend worship on a regular basis. But what about when illness or disability impede our participation in our Sunday morning celebrations? What about when we lose our very ability to ask for the sacrament? Is the sacrament still our treasure, the gift that God has provided for us against our sins, death and all evils?

Joanna has been a faithful member of a Lutheran parish for all of her life. For many years she served on the altar guild, lovingly and with great care attending to the tasks of preparing the table for Holy Communion. She was often the first one at church on Sunday morning and the last one to leave. As a faithful and active member she was fed and nourished at the table, strengthened and renewed in faith.

As she aged, Joanna began to demonstrate signs of diminishing cognitive abilities. Eventually it became evident that she was suffering the ravages of Alzheimer's disease. Still, she came faithfully Sunday mornings, participating in the holy supper with joy and thanksgiving. As her illness progressed, Joanna could no longer live independently. She moved into a long-term care facility. At first, she received many visitors from her parish. People picked her up for church on Sundays. Over time, that grew more difficult. She often didn't recognize the people who came to visit and sometimes her behavior in church was disruptive. People quit visiting, saying, "She doesn't know me anyway." She wasn't picked up for church anymore. Her dementia increased. No one thought to bring her communion believing she could no longer respond. One day Joanna wandered into a communion service in the facility in which she lived. As the presider said "The Lord be with you," Joanna responded "And also with you." "Lift up your hearts" and again her response, "We lift them up to the Lord." She held out her hands, clearly famished, eager to receive the bread, in a way that was remembered from deep within her being. Tears flowed down her face as she was once again nourished on the body and blood of Christ.

We may think there are times when it is no longer meaningful to bring Holy Communion to persons outside of Sunday worship. Circumstances, physical or psychological, appear to block participation, making it more awkward than beneficial. Unsure of what to do, we avoid the problem, making assumptions about who "needs" the sacrament or not. We effectively wean people off the life-giving bread of heaven because of our discomfort with the real conditions of their lives.

The Church is called to be steward of God's holy mysteries, bringing the grace of Jesus Christ to those whom God calls to the table, especially those who cannot make it on their own. Our meal embraces those who are dying, even when they are no longer able to take solid food. A drop of wine on the tongue is sufficient. Our meal embraces those who are psychologically unstable, those whose voices have been silenced by a stroke, those whose health is fragile and whose mobility is limited or non-existent. All of our ingenuity may be called upon to ensure their participation. We will need to ascertain how they can most easily receive the elements. We will need to remember that often these people cannot sit for long periods of time, and we will reach out, even at the risk of failing or being rebuffed, because we bear the life-giving gifts of Christ as we share the gifts of bread and wine.

The whole congregation sponsors the baptized, promising to "faithfully care for them and help them in every way as God gives... opportunity, that...living in the covenant of their baptism and in communion with the Church, they may lead godly lives..." (*Holy Baptism, Lutheran Book of Worship, p. 122*) Neither intellectual, psychological or physical circumstances bind this promise but only the meaning of baptism as belonging, an undefeatable belonging in Christ. This belonging transcends the limits of our lives.

After a lengthy, debilitating illness, Stephen, a life-long Lutheran, accustomed to communion services on weekdays as well as each Sunday, lay wasting away in a nursing home. During the days as he faded away, his wife asked about Holy Communion. He shook his head, "Not yet." Daily, his form shrank; his speech was less frequent, barely audible. A nod, a blink signed his assent when his wife offered prayer or song. Finally, he ceased to eat; taking only water spooned into his mouth. She was certain he had forgotten the Eucharist. Still, one night, three nights before he died, she asked again, "Do you want me to bring Holy Communion now?" Stephen's eyes flicked open, he was mute, but, staring at him, she took it for assent.

She came then with three others, bringing themselves, the bread, the wine, the prayers, gathered around his bed, greeting him in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. His hoarse whisper, clearly exclaiming the name of the pastor, clearly glad, was only slightly less shocking than seeing his hand, long motionless, now move slowly to his forehead, making a strong sign of the cross. He listened, silent, motionless, to the gospel from John, to prayers for him and the thanksgiving, eyelids drifting open and shut. The pastor offered him a wine-soaked scrap of bread, "The body of Christ, given for you" and Stephen struggled mightily to open his mouth and receive this mystery of grace. A spoon's worth of wine, "The blood of Christ." Shaking and limp, he crossed himself once more, "Amen." He sighed, closed his eyes, exhausted of any further words, needing no further gestures.

One can imagine not offering the sacrament to Stephen, thinking "What could it possibly mean to him now?" But that tiny assembly around no altar but a deathbed, sharing Christ's body with one who had no more words to utter and little freedom left, made a speech with sighs too deep for words, a speech from God when no other words made sense. Christ is remembered in the midst of those whom God chooses, heals and uses to witness that there is abundant life in the world, even in death or disability. God's gifts are an abundant mercy, working more than we can know, more than we can control. Our calling is to bring these gifts to those who inherit them in baptism, despite our reservations, our logic, and our judgments.

The *Occasional Services* book provides for *Distribution of Communion to Those in Special Circumstances*, a rite that encourages the ancient practice of the church: to bring the extra bread of the supper to the sick and to those who did not have enough to eat because they were poor. It is a way of embracing and including all of God's children at the table, of enacting the truth that there is no place where God is not with us, gathering and feeding us for abundant life. May we continue to expand the hospitality of the holy table that we may all be fed and nourished even unto eternal life.

Come, Holy Spirit, gather your holy people in the breaking of the bread. Like the ancient prophets strengthened by this very bread, teach us to get up from the table and quickly go tell the others, bringing to them the living words of bread and wine, freeing them from all fear. Teach us to pray for one another, giving thanks for each other as a eucharistic people whom God sends forth to bear God's mercy into our hungry world. Amen.

Jann and Karen.



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