

Reclaiming Our Birthright ~ One Bread. One Body.

Bob and Nancy Kelly write their church...

Dear fellow disciples of Jesus Christ,

The people have gathered and now the table is spread. After blessing God for the goodness of salvation, the pastor lifts the bread and cup before the gathered community: "Come to the table where everyone is welcome. The gifts of God for the people of God." The community responds "Thanks be to God!"

So each Sunday morning we acclaim that Christ's table is the table of ultimate hospitality, the table where everyone is invited to take a place and eat and drink. This is God's gift to God's people, the place from which no one is turned away.

The people have gathered and now the table is spread. The hostess announces birthdays, accomplishments, and concerns for prayer: "Bless this food to your service, O Lord." The community falls into line and is fed. All are welcome and no one is turned away.

So each Wednesday evening Christ's table is set again, only this time in the parish hall, not in the chancel. Just like on Sunday, there are flowers and candles, but instead of bread and wine, the table is set with salad, pasta, beans, and soup.

One might see these two tables as being miles apart, but they are not. The one inevitably leads to the other. Whenever we share Christ's Eucharistic meal with one another, we commit ourselves to extending the table, to opening the table, to being the place where everyone really is welcome—not grudgingly, but joyfully! The Eucharistic community, the community created and shaped by Word and Sacrament, is the community of hospitality.

St. Paul reminds the Corinthians, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (*1 Corinthians 10:16-17*). In commenting on these words, Luther says, "This fellowship [of the sacrament] consists in this, that all the spiritual possessions of Christ and his saints are shared and become the common property of [the one] who receives this sacrament. Again all sufferings and sins also become common property; and thus love engenders love in return and unites" (*The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, Luther's Works, 35: 51*).

The table around which we eat and drink the Lord's Supper is not isolated from any of the other tables around which we gather. It is, in a sense, the model for those other tables: everyone is welcome, no one goes away hungry. Yet we know that there aren't very many such tables in our society. In the places where each of us lives, not only are there hungry people, there are hungry children. Too often it is the poor who are sent away empty while the rich are filled with good things.

The Eucharist is a witness to a world that is very different from ours, the world of the Reign of God. When we confuse the Communion table with our worldly tables we end up like the Corinthians, sick and ill: “For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk . . . For this reason many of you are sick and ill, and some have died” (1 Corinthians 11:21, 30). People have died on the streets of our cities, died because too many of us “go ahead with our own supper.”

Each Sunday, hearing the Word of God and eating and drinking the Lord’s Supper presents us with a different picture, a picture of a world where everyone is welcome to come and eat and live. As we celebrate that picture weekly it shapes us. We become the people who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner. We become disciples and witnesses as the Holy Spirit fills us in, with, and under the Word and the Sacraments.



We were first part of a community which celebrated Holy Communion every Sunday in 1972. It was important to that community to do so, and to eat from one loaf and drink from a common cup, because that community was in a racially mixed neighbourhood and included people of several races. The weekly sharing of Christ’s body and blood both strengthened us for the work of justice in that neighbourhood and witnessed to the neighbourhood something of what the Reign of God might look like. That community of disciples could not have been what it was without the weekly nourishment of the Lord’s Supper. From those weekly celebrations, the Spirit nurtured a desire in us to be something more than we had ever been before, and the work of hospitable justice grew.

This letter is an invitation to you to risk being exposed to Christ’s radical hospitality each and every Sunday as your community gathers around Word and Sacrament. Be warned, though. Like Jacob after a night wrestling with God, you may not be able to get up from the table unchanged.

May the blessings of the Crucified God —Father, Son, and Holy Spirit— be with you all.

Bob & Nancy.



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Supplemental Resource

The full text of *Liturgy, Justice and the Reign of God* by J. Frank Henderson, Kathleen Quinn and former ELCIC pastor Stephen Larson (now serving in Geneva), has been posted to the Web. The original volume was published by Paulist Press in 1989. Visit <<http://www.compumart.ab.ca/fhenderson/LJRG.pdf>> for the text in PDF format. In the introduction, page 6, we read “We address this book on social justice and liturgy first to our sisters and brothers who are deeply committed to social justice, and who work hard on social justice issues...” We further read “We address this handbook also to our brothers and sisters who are deeply committed to liturgy, and work hard on worship matters...” This marvelous resource makes excellent study material for use in a parish, campus ministry community or other like setting.