

Reclaiming Our Birthright ~ Open Heart. Open Mind. Open Table.

Bill Wiegert writes his church...

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ. I greet you in the name of the Christ who has set the table and who invites us all to come to eat and to drink.

Before he went to the cross our Lord Jesus Christ provided us with a meal that we call Holy Communion. In that meal he is both gift and host. Our church has said, "The Lord's Supper is God's meal for the baptized. Admission to the Supper is by Christ's invitation, offered through the church to the baptized." (*Statement on Sacramental Practices 6.9*) I am troubled that there are those who seem to forget that it is Christ who is the host. There are some who have placed a fence around the table as if to protect God from those who might come to eat and drink in an unworthy manner. They assume that they, not Christ, are the ones who are to determine the guest list.

This was an issue that arose already in the early Church. There were those at Corinth who, failing to understand that this was the Lord's table, elevated themselves to the status of host and failed to recognize that they were all guests of the one who here offered his body and blood (*1 Corinthians 11:17-34*). This failure of the Corinthian Christians to recognize that the entire congregation, both the wealthy and the poor, was the body of Christ led to their being judged. Paul warns, "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord." (*1 Corinthians 11:27*) Their failure to discern the body, the fellowship of which they were all a part, resulted in their own judgment.

This warning of Paul has led some to place a limit on who may come to the table saying that only those who are part of their own fellowship are welcome and limiting all others from having access to the gift of God's grace. They have taken Paul's urging for inclusiveness and turned it upside down and used it as a reason to exclude some. They forget that it is Christ's table and that he is the host and that it is he who determines the guest list, not they.

Our Lutheran Confessions tell us, "The true and worthy guests, for whom this precious sacrament above all was instituted and established, are the Christians who are weak in faith, fragile and troubled, who are terrified in their hearts by the immensity and number of their sins and think that they are not worthy of this precious treasure and of the benefits of Christ because of their great impurity, who feel the weakness of their faith and deplore it, and who desire with all their heart to serve God with a stronger, more resolute faith and purer obedience." (*Holy Supper, Formula of Concord Solid Declaration 7:69*) Only God can know the heart of the one who comes to the table and only God can judge the worthiness of the one who wishes to partake of the meal.

Martin Luther struggled with the issue of his own unworthiness. He wrote, “But suppose you say, ‘What if I feel that I am unfit?’ Answer: This is my struggle as well, especially inherited from the old order under the pope when we tortured ourselves to become so perfectly pure that God might not find the least blemish in us. Because of this we became so timid that everyone was thrown into consternation, saying, ‘Alas, you are not worthy!’ Then nature and reason begin to contrast our unworthiness with this great and precious blessing, and it appears like a dark lantern in contrast to the bright sun, or as manure in contrast to jewels; then because they see this, such people will not go to the sacrament and wait until they are prepared, until one week passes into another and one half-year into yet another. If you choose to fix your eye on how good and pure you are, to wait until nothing torments you, you will never go.” (*The Sacrament of the Altar, The Large Catechism, 55 - 57*) Worthiness to receive the gift of this meal is not based upon our merit or our goodness. We rely instead on God’s grace. And in this meal God offers us grace and forgiveness.

Again Luther says, “...it is the highest art to realize that this sacrament does not depend upon our worthiness. For we are not baptized because we are worthy and holy, nor do we come to confession as if we were pure and without sin; on the contrary, we come as poor, miserable people, precisely because we are unworthy.” (*The Sacrament of the Altar, The Large Catechism, 61*) We would not refuse to proclaim the word of God’s grace and forgiveness to the one who repents and seeks absolution. Why would we withhold the Holy Sacrament from the one who wishes to receive it and the benefits that it offers? “We believe, teach, and confess that no genuine believers – no matter how weak – as long as they retain a living faith, receive the Holy Supper as condemnation. For Christ instituted this supper particularly for Christians who are weak in faith but repentant, to comfort them and to strengthen their weak faith.” (*Holy Supper, Formula of Concord Epitome 7:19*)

To deny someone access to this meal is to deny that person the gift of God’s grace. “We believe, teach, and confess that the entire worthiness of the guests at the table of his heavenly meal is and consists alone in the most holy obedience and perfect merit of Christ. We make his obedience and merit our own through true faith, concerning which we receive assurance through the sacrament. Worthiness consists in no way in our own virtues, or in internal or external preparations.” (*Holy Supper, Formula of Concord: Epitome 7:20*) So we approach the table, all of us, as sinners in need of God’s grace and forgiveness. And Christ, the gift and the host, is there to welcome us.

As Jesus broke the bread and shared it he said, “This is my body, which is given for you.” (*Luke 22:19*) “For you” are the words that tell us who is welcome at the table. With a love that does not make distinctions Jesus says, “I give you my body and my blood for the forgiveness of sin.” As we eat and drink we realize that it is not up to us to determine who is welcome at this table. It is “for you,” for me, for all. Our church has stated, “We are committed to eucharistic hospitality. Baptized persons of Lutheran and other Christian faith communities are welcomed to the Lord’s Table.” (*Statement on Sacramental Practices 6:13*) And so, in the eucharistic hospitality modeled by Christ himself, we say, “This is the Lord’s table. All baptized Christians are welcome! Come, eat and drink. Receive the gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation.”

May the grace of Christ, our host and our gift, be with you and may the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit surround you, my sisters and brothers.

Bill Wiegert.



After serving for twenty-five years in campus ministry, Bill Wiegert has returned to the parish. He is now the pastor of Lutheran Church of the Cross in Calgary, Alberta. For ten years, Pastor Wiegert also served in a deployed position as the National Campus Ministry Coordinator for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. Bill and his wife Mary Ann have three grown daughters and two grandsons.