

Reclaiming Our Birthright ~ The Strangers in Our Midst

Matthew Anderson writes his church...

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ. I greet you in the name of your Lord and mine, Jesus the Christ who fed the five thousand and sat at table with sinners and tax collectors, Pharisees and serving women.

It is by grace and “not by our own understanding or strength” (*Small Catechism: The Creed 6*) that we have been called in the Gospel and named God’s children, and our teaching and practice must be steeped in that same merciful kindness.

A new thing is happening in our midst, and we pray for the Spirit’s guidance in responding gracefully and truthfully. Many of us now live and worship in places where there is a rainbow of colours and a variety of languages, religions and cultures. Especially—but not only—in our city congregations, a new kind of person is occasionally coming forward to participate in the meal of the church. Some are seekers who have begun to celebrate the Lord’s Day with us, but are not yet baptized. Others are one-time guests among us who, in their desire not to offend their hosts, come forward with them. Yet others are believers from other faiths.

The scriptures never question that Holy Communion is the meal of the church (*1 Corinthians 11: 23-33*). Jesus invited his closest disciples to keep the meal as a remembrance of him, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, and a true sacrifice of praise to God. In unbroken continuity since that night it has been our common baptism and our meal together that have defined what it means to be a follower of Christ. This is why we repeat “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*)

Likewise, our Lutheran Confessions teach that “in the use of the sacraments faith needs to be present—faith that believes these promises and receives what is promised as offered there in the sacrament... what would be the benefit of such miracles and promises to those who do not believe? We are talking about that particular faith that believes the promise being offered, not just a faith that in a general way believes that God exists but one that believes the forgiveness of sins is being offered.” (*Apology of the Augsburg Confession 13: 19-21*)

Yet to the pastoral and gospel-inspired heart, these scriptural and confessional norms do not exhaust the witness of scripture. For Abraham and Sarah welcomed the strangers who came to their tent, and as the New Testament puts it, in their hospitality they “entertained angels unawares.” God used Rahab, Balaam and even the foreign king—Cyrus of Persia—whom Isaiah called “anointed,” to help the chosen people. And above all these, Jesus welcomed all who came to him, sitting at table with those of all beliefs and walks of life. In the final judgment, the righteous will ask: “when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you?” And the Son of Man on the throne of his glory will say: “Just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.” (*Matthew 25: 31-46*)

The Lord’s Supper is just that: the *Lord’s* Supper. As Paul so aptly points out in *1 Corinthians*, it is not ours to host and certainly not ours to refuse. And yet we know that it is a meal for the baptized who wish its benefits. So how then should we in faith react when someone who is not Christian, or not baptized, comes to the altar? I believe that the churches of God would do well to practice two disciplines in this matter: the Biblical discipline of hospitality buttressed by the churchly discipline of education. Let us again examine the kinds of people who may come unbidden—at least by us, since Christ invites whom he will—to the table:

For those who are seekers but not baptized, the responsibility is as clear as it is ours: we need to answer their call for training in discipleship. The *catechumenate* is the historic Christian response to those who have encountered Christ and wish a deeper relationship to the Church and its sacraments, and the period of Lent, culminating in baptism at the Vigil of Easter, is a good time to take up this journey.

For those who are guests and follow their hosts to the table, we must ask ourselves if the responsibility is partly ours. The words of the liturgy are enough, and they are abundantly clear: this is Jesus' meal in which he calls disciples forward to eat the bread and drink from the one cup in remembrance of him. These are "the gifts of God for the people of God." If a person who is uncommitted does not get this message, perhaps we have not said it clearly enough, and if they come forward, perhaps they really have received the message, even if not in the order we might normally prefer it. If the former, we need to practice better liturgical leadership, if the latter, we have a seeker whom God has given us. The more seriously the whole issue of what the sacrament means is discussed overall in our parishes, the more seriously a host family will also take the responsibility of helping any guests who come with them to the worship understand what they are participating in.

For those who are believers from other faiths: this is likely the rarest of all situations that may arise, but important nonetheless. Again, the Word of God tells us to practice hospitality, and our tradition tells us to make as transparent as possible the words of Jesus' invitation. The Lord's Supper is not just something we do by rote. It is the Lord himself who invites all who wish to come forward "that we might publicly confess our faith and proclaim the benefits of Christ." (*Apology of the Augsburg Confession 4: 210*). If a person who is a devout Jew or Moslem, Buddhist, Hindu or other comes forward for communion, they may have misunderstood the invitation, in which case we should endeavor—after the meal, as a proper host would—to engage them in conversation about what the Lord's Supper means to Christians. On the other hand, if they have indeed understood and have come to the table anyway, we will have even more to discuss with them, together exploring what it means to receive Christ's invitation: "Take up your cross and follow me."

There are no easy answers, but each should examine himself or herself in this matter: does our desire to protect the sacrament denote a mistrust of the power of God or the openness of Christ? And is the Body and Blood so fragile that we must keep it in the jeweled cases of our theology where none but the properly initiated can handle it? I think that Luther and the other Reformers showed the way to a more robust and healthy understanding. God does not need our protection, even while we try our best to do all things "in good order."

Finally, it is helpful, perhaps, to remember that the situation was once reversed. Christians invited to a "pagan" meal were told by Paul (*1 Corinthians 10: 23 ff*) that they could and should eat without raising any question on the grounds of conscience: "If an unbeliever invites you to go, eat whatever is set before you... But if someone says to you, 'this has been offered in sacrifice,' then do not eat it, out of consideration not for yourself, but for the one who informed you." I take this to mean that our rules should never preclude our hospitality, but that once we become aware of a need for explanation, we should, for the sake of the stranger, quietly and pastorally undertake it.

The Lord's Supper is a meal of celebration and openness. We are hosting on behalf of Jesus, who on the cross opened his arms to the whole world. It is therefore appropriate that in the matter of welcoming non-Christians into our fellowship, we should practice gracefully what Paul says: "whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks." (*1 Corinthians 10: 31-32*) God has called us to love an ever-larger world, and it is an exciting rather than a fearful task that is before us. As we take the first steps in trying to discern what to do, we remember: It is the Lord himself who justifies, who are we to condemn?

May the grace of God, opening up our hearts to the world, overflow in more knowledge and full insight in you, sisters and brothers, to the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1: 9-11)

Your brother,

Matthew.



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