

Reclaiming Our Birthright ~ God's Table: A Vision of Grace

Richard Hergesheimer writes his church...

Grace and peace be yours.

If I had the power —and I don't, thank God, although I assure you I would be a very benevolent dictator— I would require that every congregation in the world would celebrate the Lord's Supper weekly. And I am convinced that if they did so for six months, they would never return to Sunday morning worship without the meal.

To be sure, not everybody would partake every week, but at least they would have the opportunity to do so. And, given the contemporary reality of shift work, weekend work and travelling due to business or holidays, offering the meal every week is, at the very least, practical, hospitable and pastoral.

Let me tell you *why* I am beating the drum for weekly Communion.

For the last eight years, I have had the good fortune and great blessing to serve a congregation that offers the Lord's Supper every Sunday. Now, it has not always been that way. In fact, for many years, First Lutheran, like many other parishes in our church body, celebrated the Lord's Supper once a month. Later, at the urging and under the guidance of previous clergy and lay leadership, First Lutheran moved to twice a month. For a Norwegian congregation, this was already a significant step!

The primary reason for making the change to a weekly celebration was the conviction on the part of Pastor Ann Strand and me —we were co-pastors at the time— that the Holy Supper could and should be the foundation on which the congregation would stand and through which it would grow in faith and discipleship.

You see, we believed then —and still believe today— that worshippers can, without much trouble, sleepwalk their way through the Confession, daydream their way through the readings and sermon, mumble their way through the prayers and sigh their way through the hymns —whether new ones or old. But what they cannot do, no matter how hard they try, is fail to encounter Christ at the table.

Indeed, it is, without a doubt, the one place where Christ most assuredly comes to make himself known to us. And this is so because he says so. "This is my body given *for you*. This is my blood shed *for you*." (See Martin Luther's emphasis on this point in his *Large Catechism, Part V, The Sacrament of the Altar, 28-35*.) It is those two little words —for you— spoken twice, that serve as the guarantee of our owning Christ's promise that he is there/here for us, to give himself to us. It is those two little words that serve as the guarantee that in this Blessed Supper, we will meet him and, in that encounter, he will bind himself to us, and we to him, and we to one another.

Because of the certainty contained in his own promise —that whoever eats and drinks his flesh and blood has his life in him— and because of that assurance of his grace-filled presence, Ann and I were convinced that Christ would and could do as he says; and that that was something our congregation needed and could count on.

You see, because of circumstances both in and out of our control, First Lutheran was experiencing some significant changes —not the least of which was the arrival into our community life —and community worship— of a number of African refugees and immigrants for whom Lutheranism was not their church background nor was English their first language. At the same time, it was clear that their religious background (Roman Catholic for some and Anglican for others) had taught them and brought them to an attitude of deep devotion and appreciation for the Lord's Supper.

In fact, although some of these folks could not understand much of what we were saying, singing, speaking or praying, they could and did understand clearly what was happening when we raised and shared the bread and cup. It was this liturgical, visual and dramatic action —which they could see, recognize and appreciate— that gave them a sense of solace and familiarity while also drawing them into the life of our parish and the lives of our parishioners.

We may not have had very much in common, but what we did have —and could celebrate and give thanks together for— was the gift of the presence and power of Christ. And it was that presence and power —borne in, with and under the bread and wine— that formed us into one body. For us, God's table was, indeed, a vision and place of grace.

Since that time, our parish has continued to attract people from a variety of nations and cultures. And all of them —and all of us— have found our unity and community in and around the table. No matter the colour of our skin, the style of dress, the difference in names, the idiosyncracies of tradition or the difficulties of communication, we have discovered that God's grace, made most real in the meal, has bound us —and continues to bind us— to Christ and to one another.

In addition, from the generosity shown to us in our eating and drinking together has grown a generosity of money and time, of compassion and understanding. To put it another way, we have learned that the table of the Lord is inextricably connected to the tables in our fellowship hall, in our homes, in our community and on the streets. Or to put it yet another way, I am convinced, beyond any doubt, that our ministry to our community, whether inside or outside our parish family or walls, has found its *raison d'être* and its sustenance in the very grace given and found at the table.

For, in truth, how can anyone, after sharing the same loaf and cup, turn away from the natural and God-pleasing willingness to share what we have with those standing or kneeling next to us and all who are in need? And when "compassion fatigue" sets in (as it always does), it is the forgiveness, courage and strength provided by Christ at the table that rejuvenates us, that fills us up, picks us up and pushes us onward and outward again.

Thus, it is at the table that we are found by grace, bound in grace and bound to share God's grace. It is at the table that we are nurtured and compelled to share our bread, our wine, our blessings, our commitment, our forgiveness, and our very lives, just as Christ has shares those same gifts with us.

Regular —and by that I mean *weekly*— Eucharist has done far more for and to us than Pastor Ann and I could ever have imagined. To be honest, it has done exactly what Christ promised it would do: It fills us with Christ's presence, changes us into his likeness, and calls us to new life —lives of service to him and to all.

Richard.



Richard Hergesheimer is the pastor of First Lutheran Church in Vancouver, British Columbia. Married to Trudy, they have two sons, Josh and Chris, in their early 20's. Both have communed since they were four or five years of age and —thanks be to God— still regularly receive the fruits of field and vine from their father's hand. Hergy and Trudy consider this to be a very great gift.