

THE ROAD WHERE FAITH IS FOUND

TASTE AND SEE THE GRACE ETERNAL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN WORSHIP • 461

A SACRAMENTAL JOURNEY: SHAPING GOD'S PEOPLE FOR LIVES OF FAITH AND FAITHFUL DEVOTION



Both the title for this series of essays (The Road Where Faith Is Found) and the title for this essay in particular (Taste and See the Grace Eternal) are borrowed from the poetry of United Church of Canada pastor Sylvia Dunstan (1955-1993). The series title comes from Bless Now, O God, the Journey (Evangelical Lutheran Worship hymn 326) while the essay title comes from All Who Hunger, Gather Gladly (Evangelical Lutheran Worship hymn 461). Sylvia Dunstan has four hymn texts in Evangelical Lutheran Worship — more than any other Canadian contributor. See hymns 326, 455, 461 and 615.

Clifford Reinhardt writes...

I am grateful for this opportunity to contribute to our church's essay project, *The Road Where Faith Is Found*. I especially appreciate the subtitle of my assigned essay — *A Sacramental Journey: Shaping God's people for lives of faith and faithful devotion* — for I think of my own faith formation as a journey that has been shaped by the experience, the study, and the practice of Word and Sacrament.

All who hunger, gather gladly; holy manna is our bread.
Come from wilderness and wand'ring. Here in truth we will be fed.
You that yearn for days of fullness, all around us is our food.
Taste and see the grace eternal. Taste and see that God is good.

— *Evangelical Lutheran Worship 461, stanza 1*

In my western-Canadian German-Lutheran background, the Sacrament of Baptism was an essential feature of ongoing life in the church. It was understood as a necessity for salvation and as the initiation into membership. The Sacrament of Holy Communion, for its part, was not so prominent as it is now. It was not the case that the Meal was disdained; rather, it was more a matter of practice that had been shaped by generations of colonial and pioneering experience in Eastern Europe and the prairies of western Canada.

Moreover, for much of my childhood in British Columbia I attended worship services only in the summer months; otherwise, I attended Sunday School while my parents worshipped in the German-language service, because the two forms of ministry ran concurrently in our congregation. So it was not until I was confirmed in the faith as a young teenager that I began to worship Sunday by Sunday throughout the year. Even then, Holy Communion seemed more the exception rather than the rule, for our congregation administered the Sacrament of the Altar only once each month. That was simply the standard and the expectation.

And it pervaded much of western Canadian Lutheranism. Even in the earlier period of my service as an ordained pastor, we did not share the Lord's meal every Sunday, but roughly half the occasions on which the church gathered. Only in the second half of my career has the practice of weekly communion become the standard.

Formed and Fed in Faith

Over the last few decades, the renewed emphasis upon the sacraments in our church has reshaped my understanding of my life, the church, God's redemptive act in Jesus Christ, and our practice of Christian ministry. The baptismal motif of dying and rising certainly informs my use of Confession and Forgiveness, but also provides me with a persistent perspective in my reading, study, and ministry of the scriptures. Similarly the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper has changed the way I think of the nurture that God intends for all people through our ministry.

Thus the meaning of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession becomes clearer: "The Church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly." Luther and his fellow reformers assumed that the standard for proclamation was Word and Sacrament — neither Word by itself nor Sacrament by itself, but both together. Moreover, they understood the church in a dynamic way: called together by the Holy Spirit and enabled by that same Spirit to minister and to receive, the church is laid low and created anew. By its very nature in relation to God, the church undergoes the dynamics of drowning and rising, in accordance with its own proclamation in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.

This is obvious, of course, in Confession and Forgiveness, just as Luther teaches in the Catechisms; but its real power resides in its pervasive influence upon our broader ministry. It is no stretch for me, therefore, to discern the same dying-and-rising motif in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. In spite of our resourcefulness, strength, and sophistication, we still come to the Table to be fed by God ... and if that weren't humbling enough, God serves us food whose character both judges our existence and creates and nurtures the new creation that God promises.

So while we speak of *tasting* metaphorically, we also speak of it quite literally! We eat the bread and drink the wine of Holy Communion, trusting that as we eat and drink we are receiving the Lord Jesus Christ.

But we also taste metaphorically! My study of scripture has likewise shaped me as a pastor and as a child of faith. Here the language and the literature of discipleship come to the fore. The New Testament gospels portray the selection and the development of the disciples in concert with the ministry and the passion of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, the Master who trains his followers.

One of the more unsettling features of these chronicles — which becomes more apparent only with repeated reading and one's own "trial by fire" — is the ongoing struggle of those first followers to comprehend Jesus' teaching and thus be faithful and true. Although the four gospels vary in their depiction of the disciples' plight, all arrive at the same conclusion: whatever else true discipleship entails, it certainly comprises personal failure as a consequence of the desire to give one's utmost ... and

necessary reinstatement by God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Personal authenticity as a Christian includes a keen awareness of divine grace and its necessity. *God must do it all*. By all means, let us resolve to serve; let us employ our physical powers and our noble resolution and sheer determination. But let us know just as surely that God must do it all.

This is the point in Jesus' parables about seed growing secretly in the dark earth (see, for example, Mark 4:26-29). Likewise this is the spiritual content of mysterious activities at night, when landowners and householders are sleeping (see the previous scriptural example, as well as Matthew 13:24-30 and all the nighttime references in Jesus' passion story). This is the *divine mystery* at the heart of our faith. This has everything to do with our ministry, for our English word, *sacrament*, comes from the Latin, *sacramentum*, which is the word that the church supplied to translate the Greek, *mysterion* — that is, *mystery*.

I now appreciate that preaching and teaching are, in their respective ways, sacramental. This is so because, in our practice of the ministry as much as in personal faith, we inevitably come up against the mystery of God.

Formed and Fed to be Cross-Eyed

Our place is the foot of the cross. Here God establishes for us the faithful point of view, the interpretative lens through which we comprehend our life. Here we stand and gaze upon the mystery of God-among-us, Jesus of Nazareth, the Anointed One, the Christ. Jesus is the human embodiment of the heart, the mind, and the will of God. He suffers the inevitable consequences of taking up the life of perfect service to God. The gospel story reveals just what God the Father is up to: Grace on the loose. It's Good News, but it goes against our grain. So, relying upon our own judgment and ingenuity, we unwittingly seek to rid ourselves of Jesus ... and in the act we indict ourselves. And yet for God it is precisely the opportunity to reveal the fullness of divine mercy for our sake.

The cross is not a cog or a wheel in an ideology or mechanism; rather, it is the end of all ideologies or mechanisms of salvation and understanding. The cross is God's tool facilitating God's mysterious operation upon us, for the sake of faithful discipleship and salvation. Some readers may recognize this as Luther's theology of the cross. I have studied it for many years, but only in recent times have I appreciated that the point of it all is not *the theology*, but *the theologian*. The issue is not that you and I believe and say the "right" thing. Rather, the issue is that God intends to claim and transform you and me so that we may live as new creatures together with our resurrected Lord, and serve God's redemptive purposes. God wants us to speak and enact the Good News, for the sake of the redemption of the world.

That God uses the cross is unsettling. It was, after all, a particularly cruel means of execution, intended to inflict humiliation and pain not only upon the condemned but as well upon the broader population. And yet it is the lens through which we view ourselves, the world, the scripture, and God. The Good News is that God meets us in the baseness of our existence and begins precisely there. God acts for you and for me in ways that may well terrorize us, but ultimately will enliven us and fill us with the joy and peace of the Spirit.

Part and parcel of this mystery is the *passiveness of faith*. Such passiveness is related to Jesus' *passion* and also to *patience*. It involves suffering — not so much in terms of physical or emotional anguish, but rather in our awareness of our limitations and sin in the presence of God. We "suffer" God. By grace, we let God be God. This frees us to attend to the responsibility and joy of simply being the creatures that God wants us to be.

Formed and Fed at our Tables

Precisely because of the cross, we define the church and speak of ourselves according to Article VII of the Augsburg Confession. This is not one definition among several; rather, this is *the* definition. Apart from the proclamation of Word and Sacrament, the church does not exist. It is because God's Spirit calls us together to proclaim and hear, to administer and receive, that the church has its being.

Because we want to be faithful to our calling in Christ — indeed, because we confess that apart from God we have no life! — we devote ourselves to scripture and prayer. We listen to God and we speak to God. We trust the word that promises God's abiding presence throughout our lives, including our most mundane daily experiences. Jesus taught and ministered in a variety of settings, but mealtime was arguably the most profound. Now, mealtime is a poignant time for any people, in any time and any place, but among his own people it was especially significant. This was so certainly because of the socioeconomic pressures of the day, where the peasant class (the vast majority of people) barely survived and had no option but to live hand-to-mouth. But even more important here is the matter of righteousness under the Law of Moses, which comes into sharpest focus at table. For through Moses God had instructed the Chosen People to avoid certain foods and certain people; and in their zeal to extend temple purity to those who could not worship at the temple, the religious leaders of the day enjoined upon the Jewish masses the rules of purity governing the priests and temple staff.

Thus, it was especially significant that Jesus conducted ministry at mealtime. Jesus' words in Matthew 11 stand out in sharp relief:

But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn." For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon"; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds. (Matthew 11:16-19)

Even if we grant that Jesus caricatures the situation², he nevertheless neatly sums up both the human predicament and the locus of his ministry. The connections with our Sacrament of Holy Communion are obvious and powerful, but let's also examine the connections to the prayer that he taught.

Formed and Fed at Prayer

My wife, Lorraine, and I jointly devote ourselves to Bible reading and prayer in our home, Monday through Saturday. We use *Eternity For Today*, the devotional resource published by our church. Our personal prayers are typically succinct, covering the pressing needs of people with whom we are acquainted. We always conclude with the *Lord's Prayer*, in part because of the force of tradition but also because of our convictions that by it we bring to God's attention (and ours!) the things that we truly need.

Two petitions stand out: (1) Give us this day our daily bread; (2) Forgive us our sins as forgive those who sin against us. The rest of the prayer is constructed on these two petitions.³ What we need is daily bread. As Luther explains in his Catechisms, this includes everything that we need as creatures of God. It is precisely because of these needs and our lack of faith that we also need forgiveness of sin, for the nature of our sin is various forms of "anxiety" over our needs — hence possessiveness, covetousness, jealousy, procurement by deceit, theft, etc. I regard the next petition a summation of the preceding two: *Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.*

The church uses the Lord's Prayer in various orders of public worship, but most memorably and most poignantly just before we administer and share Jesus' meal. This practice is attributable to more than simply the force of tradition or respectful obedience to Jesus. We preserve this practice because we

believe that Jesus discerns our human plight and saves us precisely there. Thus Jesus' Meal and Jesus' Prayer inform and reinforce each other: Because of our need, we ask God to feed us and to save us from our inevitable sin relating to our own needs. God's answer to us in Christ is simple and profound: God provides precisely what we need — daily bread, forgiveness of sin, and salvation from the consequences of our need.

Formed and Fed ... and Now a Little Hungry for The Daily Office

It was not until I attended Camrose Lutheran College (now the University of Alberta Augustana Campus) that I worshipped using the liturgy of Matins (Morning Prayer). Once each week, Rev. K. Glen Johnson, the President of the college, led worshippers with the setting provided in the *Service Book and Hymnal*. A capable singer, he led us through the Anglican-style chant a *cappella*.

A few years later, when I enrolled in the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon, we learned the setting for Morning Prayer provided in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, which had been published in the previous year. Of course, we also studied the Daily Office in our liturgics courses. Because our congregation, Redeemer (at that time growing numerically, musically adept, and liturgically adventurous), was particularly eager to take up these new worship materials, we quickly learned all three settings of Holy Communion as well as the Daily Office. Thus grew my love for the Daily Office — Morning Prayer (Matins), Evening Prayer (Vespers), and Prayer at the Close of Day (Compline).

In the musical settings of the *LBW*, I have especially enjoyed the Song of Zechariah in Morning Prayer (p. 134); and the Magnificat and the Litany in Evening Prayer (pp. 147-151). The service of Prayer at Close of Day in its entirety is a jewel — a calming devotional respite in the sometimes stormy sea of life.

But the opportunity to use these lovely services has been scant in my experience. In the Lutheran congregations where I have been a member or where I have served as Pastor, Morning Prayer has been utilized only occasionally. For example, at Grace, Burnaby BC, where I served from 1986 to 1997, there was normally only one worship service each Sunday. Since the congregation did not commune every week, but every other week and on festival Sundays, we used Morning Prayer whenever there was a fifth Sunday in the month and perhaps on a few other occasions ... so about 6 times each year. Our use of Evening Prayer likewise was relatively infrequent — usually only for a season, like Lent or Advent, and even then occasional. In my experience the final sister in the trio, Prayer at the Close of Day, has been used only in retreat settings.

All who hunger, sing together, Jesus Christ is living bread.
Come from loneliness and longing. Here in peace we have been fed.
Blest are those who from this table live their days in gratitude.
Taste and see the grace eternal. Taste and see that God is good.

— *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 461, stanza 1

In the congregation I currently serve (Augustana, Vancouver), Holy Communion is administered every Sunday, except when I am on vacation and an ordained minister is not available. Thus, we have never used Morning Prayer from *Lutheran Book of Worship*. Neither have we used Evening Prayer nor Prayer at the Close of Day, for our congregation is almost exclusively a “Sunday morning” worshipping community. Moreover, I suspect that this is the standard throughout much of the ELCIC, except where there are larger congregations with mobile and engaged worshippers.

This saddens me. I love the musical recitation of scripture in the Daily Office. As of this writing, I haven't had opportunity to explore the settings in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, but I know that I will find satisfaction and joy in the musical settings of the psalms, canticles, and the litany. I pray that the

opportunity will come to utilize these liturgies in the local expressions of our church. I want to taste and see together with our church and all God's people.

¹ Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids MI & Cambridge UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997).

² John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership With Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 20-26.

³ James Breech, *The Silence of Jesus: The Authentic Voice of the Historical Man* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), pp. 51-64.

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