

Author: James Anderson

Series: Pastoral Essays on the Statement on Sacramental Practices

Series Editor: André Lavergne [editor@worship.ca]

Issue: Easter 6, 1992

Copyright: © 1992, 1998 Sub-Committee on Worship and the Arts, Parish Life Committee, Eastern Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. This document may be freely reproduced for non-commercial purposes with credit and mention of the **Lift Up Your Hearts** web site <http://www.worship.ca/> as the source.

James L Anderson is (1998) Coordinator of Pastoral Care, Northwood Care, Halifax, NS. The complete series of Pastoral Essays appears at <http://www.worship.ca/sec3.html#sacprac>.

SP = Statement on Sacramental Practices

Sacrament as Healing Encounter

Thomas' Story

Several months ago, Thomas had routine heart bypass surgery. Everything was going according to medical procedure and plan. He was discharged about a week following surgery and, that too, was according to schedule. Two weeks after discharge, I met Thomas again. This time he was in an Intensive Care Unit.

There had been a post-surgical complication that was a life-threatening situation for Thomas. He had spent the night before in surgery again. His family understood that, if he lived, he might never walk again. Several weeks passed and he was determined to live and to walk. During his rehabilitation, I asked if he would like to receive Communion. Without hesitation his answer was affirmative.

Little did I know at the time, but this gathering around the bread and wine would be a turning point in Thomas' life and recovery. Here was a man, intensely close to his family, community and church, and he was separated from them. Surgery had not only cut deep into his body, but into his soul as well.

The Power of Holy Communion

When we, as pastors and chaplains, gather people—whether they are in hospital, nursing home, or university—to receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we need to be prepared for powerful outcomes.

Section 5.3 of the Statement on Sacramental Practices states:

“Holy Communion is a means of grace through which the crucified and risen Christ awakens faith, saves, forgives, unites, gives life, comforts and strengthens God’s people for the work to which they are called in the world.”

Holy Communion: Giving Voice to Pain

As ministers of Word and Sacrament, we may tend to stand in the way of this “means of grace.” Or we may decide to invite those, who are dis-membered from that which gives meaning to their lives to give voice, to their pain and suffering.

Walter Brueggemann, author of *Finally Comes the Poet*, says:

“The cry of the helpless, if they have a voice, will mobilize God to act ...It is the same in the presence of Jesus. Bartimaeus, the blind man daringly initiates interaction with Jesus. He cries out saying, ‘Son of David, have mercy’ (Mark 10:47). Remarkably, the people around him try to silence him, to drive him back to his muteness (verse 48). In an act of urgent hope, however, the beggar cries out all the more. Jesus hears. Jesus heals and concludes, ‘Your faith has made you well’ (verse 52). A capacity to cry out the pain has caused health to come. The pain of the world, embodied in the largely silent congregation of ancient Israel and in the silence of this blind beggar, is the stuff out of which new life comes. Newness, however, requires faith in order to speak the pain. Out of voiced pain, Bartimaeus is permitted a new life. ‘Immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way’ (verse 54). Had he not cried out in pain, he never would have come to a new life of discipleship.”

In our institutions, there are many who would desire to keep those in pain silent. As ministers of Word and Sacrament, we carry a powerful tool that can re-member a person. Gathered around the Sacrament, I have found many opportunities where people have given voice to their pain. This is a must for new life.

Thomas, introduced above, in order to mend his body and soul, first had to voice his pain. Hand in hand, with his wife and sister, he heard the words, “given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” That’s all he needed to begin.

Holy Communion: Yielding Meaning

William Willimon, author of *Worship as Pastoral Care*, says:

“In the actions of the Meal, an individual who feels isolated and unaccepted may discover the possibility for community and incorporation.”

This is the next step for Thomas, or anyone dis-membered from community: to find meaning.

The Lord’s Supper re-members the person into community and establishes a sense of discipleship. Again, Walter Brueggemann says:

“As we find our tongues, we find our identity and our vocation. Our lives are given back to us in the oddness of praise. More we could not ask than to be ‘lost in wonder, love and praise,’

wonder that overrides excessive certitude;
love that casts out fear;
praise that turns the reduction to glad amazement.”

As ministers of Word and Sacrament are we ready to accept this? Once a person gives voice to pain there is a re-membering to community and a new direction for the person within that community.

Holy Communion: Community Blessing

Monika Hellwig writes concerning the blessing of the food at Eucharist:

“The effect of such a blessing is not to make the bread holy but to hallow those around the table who share and eat the bread, making their act of eating a moment of communion with God in heightened awareness and receptivity of his blessing which must not come to rest in those who are here at table but must overflow in them to become a blessing for others.”

The Eucharist points the participants to the community where the pain is shared. This may be the blessing for others that flows from the Table of the Lord.

Finally, Eugene H. Peterson, in *Five Smooth Stones of Pastoral Work*, writes:

“Pastoral work among the suffering wears a path between home and sanctuary-listens to the poured out, individualized grief and brings it into the sanctuary where it becomes part of the common grief, is placed at the foot of the cross and subjected to the powers of salvation which are diagrammed in all theologies of the atonement.” (page 117)

The Power of Holy Communion

Thomas is going home on weekends now. He is walking again. He has given voice to his pain. On his trips home I am sure his family, community and church share their stories. They have all been strengthened in their mission.

Holy Communion is a powerful sacrament.

Suggested Resources

Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation by Walter Brueggemann. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989.

The Eucharist and the Hunger of the World by Monika K. Hellwig. New York: Paulist Press, 1976.

Worship as Pastoral Care by William H. Willimon. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979.

Five Smooth Stones of Pastoral Work by Eugene H. Peterson. John Knox, 1980.