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SP = Statement on Sacramental Practices

The Sacraments' Gentle Call to Justice: Creation and New Creation

There are several motifs within our *Statement on Sacramental Practices* that might serve as a gentle call to an awareness for justice within our worship assemblies. Consider, first of all, that the sacraments are normally celebrated on a Sunday within the context of corporate worship. In the second century, Justin Martyr wrote: "We hold this meeting of us all on Sunday because it is the first day, the day when God transformed matter and darkness and created the world, and also because it was on this same day that Jesus Christ, our Saviour, rose from the dead." Themes of creation and new creation in Christ are a part of our Sunday gathering.

Sunday is the Lord's Day, the day of our Lord's resurrection. This "little Easter" is a day of freedom and liberation from death. It is a day to renew and reaffirm our commitment to Christ, who stands as our liberator from sin, death and everything that enslaves and shackles people. Sunday is a day in which the church experiences the presence of the crucified and risen Christ through Word and Sacraments. Earlier generations of Christians called Sunday "the eighth day," the first day of new creation following resurrection.

Sunday also bears with it connotations of the Sabbath—the day of rest, renewal and re-creation. It is the day in which, in spite of Sunday opening laws, time itself is blessed.

As Liturgy, Justice and the Reign of God: Integrating Vision and Practice (J. Frank Henderson, Kathleen Quinn and Stephen Larson. New York: Paulist Press, 1989) states it:

"In all of these Sunday elements the reign or kingdom of God is present. Like a diamond flashing light, each facet represents a different aspect. Look at Sunday one way and one discerns the reign of God shattering the power of death and freeing God's covenant people from the tyranny of death. View Sunday another way and one observes the Christian community celebrating as if God's reign had begun, as if Christ were already King of Creation, Lord of the Nations, as if all the community were equal and welcome at God's throne. Hold it yet another way and one recognizes our common need to rest, to be re-created and recentered in our lives, to remind ourselves that we are creatures and to offer to our Creator our prayer, praise and thanksgiving."

Worship: A Radical Equality

The assembly gathers on a Sunday, and, in its very gathering, encounters a sense of justice. Our worship gathering is an experience of radical equality before God. Our gathering is the embodiment of Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Look around your worship assembly some Sunday. Are the wealthy members seated in the front? Do the poor, refugees gather in the rear? Are children shunted to the side or hidden away? I hope not—for the assembly itself is an expression of the radical equality of all the baptized before God. As Robert Hovda put it:

"Where else in our society are all of us—not just a gnostic elite, but everyone — called to be social critics, called to extricate ourselves from the powers and principalities that claim to rule our daily lives, in order to submit ourselves to the sole dominion of God before whom all of us are equal? Where else in our society are we all addressed and sprinkled and bowed to and incensed and touched and kissed and treated like somebody — all in the very same way? Where else do economic czars and beggars get the same treatment? Where else are food and drink blessed in a common prayer of thanksgiving, broken and poured out, so that everybody shares and shares alike?" (*ibid*, page 79)

The Radical Equality of Baptism

This radical equality begins with the sacrament of Baptism. Sections 3 and 4 of the *Statement on Sacramental Practices* remind us of the theological foundations and practical principles of our Baptism. In Baptism we experience forgiveness and incorporation into the body of Christ. In Baptism we renounce the powers of darkness, evil and all the world's bad news in order to turn around and announce our belief in God, our embracing of God's good news in Christ. In Baptism we are set free from sin and death. In Baptism we begin the daily living out of a baptismal lifestyle that includes, among other things, the pursuit of justice and peace in the world. Micah could be said to have articulated a baptismal lifestyle: "And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8).

The baptized people of God are sent forth in mission and ministry as instruments of God's peace and living signs of God's justice. But this mission and ministry is not undertaken alone. The presence of the Holy Spirit inspires and empowers our ministry. The crucified and risen Lord is our companion in mission. One central way in which Christ is present to us is through a meal—the Eucharist — a meal to nurture and sustain us in our lives of faith.

The Radical Equality of Eucharist

The Eucharist is a meal. In this meal we again encounter the radical equality of the people of God. All are welcome at the table. All are fed equally with a bit of bread, a sip of wine. All are equal in their need for God's sustenance and grace. Section 6.9 of the *Statement on Sacramental Practices* affirms this reality when it addresses the communion of the baptized. As all are heirs and recipients of God's grace in Baptism—regardless of age, race, sex or class—so all are recipients of God's grace in the meal—regardless of age, race, sex or class. As with a Lutheran understanding of Baptism, all are eligible to receive God's gracious gifts in the meal—not only those of a certain age, not only those of a certain level of knowledge or intelligence, not only those of a certain economic status. All.

The Eucharist implicitly and explicitly critiques the tragedy of world hunger and of our age's unjust distribution of food in the world. St. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth precisely on this point. In I Corinthians 11, Paul berates the church for its lack of awareness of the body of Christ within the community. Some were feasting within the assembly at the expense of the poor and hungry. Paul chastised the church and declared they were not sharing the Lord's Supper. Paul commanded the church to "discern the body;" to insure that the entire community—the full body of Christ—was participating fully, and equally, in the meal. The Eucharist thus becomes a paradigm, or model of how we might live, not only in our weekly sacramental encounter with God's kingdom, but in all times, in all places.

Word and Creation

In both Baptism and Eucharist, elements of creation are joined to the Word. Water, bread and wine—stuff of the earth—are used to signify and bear the presence of Christ into the assembly. In the baptismal prayer of thanksgiving over the water, as with the eucharistic prayer of thanksgiving over the bread and wine, creation is invoked and to the Creator thanks is given. What are the challenges and implications at a time when the environment—the very creation—is endangered, nigh unto being terminally ill due to human misuse and dreadful dominion?

When water is poured into the font during the prayer's invocation of the Spirit brooding over the waters of creation, and when wine is poured into the chalice as the congregation sings "Fill to the brim our cup of blessing," do you think about the creation? Do you ponder Paul's image, in Romans 8, of all creation groaning in travail, waiting with us for redemption? One might. One should.

Our Prayers: Context for Baptism and Eucharist

The baptismal and eucharistic prayers of thanksgiving remind us that the sacraments are celebrated within a context of prayer. Our prayers not only join us as a gathered community, but connect us to all the world. In our prayers, the scope of the community is enlarged beyond the confines of our congregation, our synod, our church; in our prayers we roam the world and are joined to the body of Christ throughout the world, indeed throughout all time and space. Our prayer joins us to brothers and sisters in Christ who are experiencing persecution. Our prayers undergird those who are in need. Our prayers beg for God's reign of justice amidst an unjust world, a world broken by unshared bread. Our prayers intercede for God's kingdom to come among us and to all the world.

The Sacraments' Gentle Call to Justice

The sacraments are celebrated with the radical equality of the baptized community of God's people. Through Baptism we are incorporated into that covenant community. Through the Eucharist we are nurtured within it. But both sacraments send us forth into the world in mission and ministry, in pursuit of justice and peace. Our assembly's worship often concludes with the blessing that propels us into that mission and ministry: "Go in peace. Serve the Lord."

We go in peace because we have been forgiven in Baptism and Eucharist. We go in peace because in Word and Sacraments we have been encouraged, empowered, sustained and upheld by the crucified and risen Christ.

Then we are sent to "serve the Lord." Matthew 25 reminds us where it is that we encounter the Lord most explicitly: among the hungry and thirsty, the strangers and imprisoned, the naked and sick. In our daily living out of a baptismal lifestyle we shall serve the Lord as we live out our mission and ministry among the wounded ones of God's creation. We shall be sustained in that mission and ministry by our Lord who comes to us, in bread broken and wine poured out, and who is present among us wherever two or three are gathered in his name.

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