

Author: Don McLeod
Series: Pastoral Essays on the Statement on Sacramental Practices
Series Editor: André Lavergne
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 <http://www.worship.ca/> as the source.

Don McLeod is (1998) pastor at Faith Lutheran Church, Calgary, Alberta.

SP = Statement on Sacramental Practices

Knowing or Being Known: Reflections on the Gospel We Communicate as We Commune the Baptized

Who Does God See?

The two-year-old hands reach spontaneously toward you only to be efficiently folded away by a disconcerted parent. Trace a cross on her forehead but you know she is not satisfied.

Mommy, I want to eat.

Mother's hands move forward. You break the loaf and offer a piece to the waiting throne created by the arched hands.

The Body of Christ given for you.

Grace revealed. Forgiveness shared. Sacred presence known. Thanksgiving received. Thanksgiving returned.

Tell me...when the two-year-old and her mother come to the table, who does God see?

Does God see a busy woman weary from the demands that just won't stop? (She comes hoping to steal just a moment of grace, a whisper of eternity. She kneels in confession bearing her impatience and distraction with life. She reaches out in relief seeking to be nourished, to be lifted up, to begin again.)

Who does God see?

Does God see a child, come-home, bearing the burdens of the journey, with questions in her eyes, seeking the love and acceptance that is always the gift given?

What does God see, peering into the world of a two year old? Is it not the same thing? The distractions may be different but is not the reality the same? The two-year-old, like her mother, is a child, come-home, bearing the burdens of the journey, with questions in her eyes, seeking the love and acceptance that is always the gift given.

What word does God desire to speak to this child?

I love you. I have called you by name and I know you. You belong to me.

How do we, the worshipping community, become the channel for this Gospel message? How do we communicate this good news to a two-year-old child? We do just as her mother does at home. We embrace her; we teach her about the Way; we discipline her in love; and, perhaps most importantly, as we do her mother, we feed her the holy meal of love and acceptance.

Knowing or Being Known?

However... this mother hesitates. So do many other parents. There is a nagging question which troubles them.

But she doesn't know what she is doing! She does not know what is happening!

To which I respond (in the spirit of Jesus and Woody Allen) with another question:

Is it a matter of *knowing* or is it really a matter of *being known*?

The joy of the Eucharist is that we are known by a God who is so *gracious* that the world is offered salvation; so intimate that a simple meal of bread and wine affords divine opportunity. God comes to bring remembrance, to touch our lives with Godly presence.

Is it a question of knowing or is it really a matter of being welcomed to the table to be known by the God who named us?

Jesus gathered his friends around the Passover meal the night before his death. He took the bread and gave thanks. His disciples nodded and prepared to enjoy the bread. Jesus paused. Holding the bread he said, "Take this and eat. This is my body."

Did the disciples *know* what Jesus was doing? Did they *understand* what bread they were eating or *grasp the meaning* of this transformed meal? Hardly. But Jesus continued as he always did. And they ate the bread and drank the wine while Jesus planted the seed of memory in their hearts. Someday, as their experience with the dying and rising Jesus grew, their own understanding of the meal would deepen. Through this relationship they became aware that they belonged to God, and that God had a vision for them, a vision that would be nurtured and sustained through this meal.

So they ate and drank freely, like children, come-home, bearing the burdens of the journey, with questions in their eyes, seeking the love and acceptance that is always the gift given.

So how do we communicate the Gospel which the *Statement on Sacramental Practices* has so boldly declared? Teaching and preaching in the congregational context are important to be sure. The *Statement* lends itself nicely to be used as an adult study. However, as with the Sacrament of Baptism, it is the faith *of the family* that brings their child forward to the communion table. Therefore I believe it is the family setting that creates the natural environment for teaching and preparing families to live out the sacramental practice of communing the baptized.

Take the Teaching "Home"

When people are struggling with these ideas, or when a family comes to me wanting to pursue the possibility of their children communing, immediately I ask myself to dinner. (You can meet in our office, but the children will be bored, and the parents will probably forget the essence of your simulating talk the minute they walk out the door.)

I think we should follow Jesus' lead. Jesus gathered his friends around the meal they understood and taught them through experience.

So gather your people around the meal table in their home. Drag the parents into understanding this simple sacramental practice by walking with the children through their own daily "supper liturgy," all the while casually comparing it with our church family's weekly "supper liturgy." As you gather at the table, leading questions will become the way of discovery. Thus, "What preparations were made for this meal?"

The food was gathered and prepared.

The bread was baked and the wine made.

The table cloth was spread, the dishes set out, the meal placed on the table.

The table is set and the offerings received.

The table grace is shared and the meal is blessed.

The great thanksgiving is sung and the gift of the meal is remembered.

We eat and drink and share the family stories.

The bread is broken and the wine is poured and we sing the family songs.

After everyone has eaten, we push away from the table, hear one more story, express our thanks for the meal and are excused to enjoy whatever opportunities remain waiting outside.

After all have communed we sing one more song of remembrance, offer a prayer of thanks, and are dismissed and sent back out into the waiting world.

The meal lends itself to little side trips along the way. My personal favourite tends to open the eyes and hearts of the parents more than those of the children (which is true for this whole exercise). However, the children always play along.

Ask them what their favourite food is and then what food they enjoy least. They will invariably speak of some obscure vegetable as their least favourite. "Do you know why we eat vegetables?" "Sure, because if we don't we won't get desert." The parents' eyes grow serious as if they are trying to impart by osmosis all their knowledge of the food groups and the nutritional value of the dreaded green vegetable.

Of course, the point is made: A parent's understanding of the ritual of eating vegetables differs greatly from that of their children. However, there isn't a parent on earth who would wait until their children fully *understand* the value of vegetables before making them struggle with brussels sprouts. The child eats vegetables from the beginning (and slowly...) in the context of a loving family, and grows in her understanding of the value and the meaning of the act.

By the time this teaching meal is over the children dutifully head toward the living room to prepare for the pastor's lecture on Communion. But the lecture is already over and, again, isn't that the point? Let's not make this a painful process of memorization and indoctrination. That would only serve to emphasize the "knowing" and de-emphasize the experience of "being known." We need to work at putting the "catechism event" back into the context of the family, where it belongs.

Let our children ask their questions, as they live, and as they experience the Communion Meal, rather than have them wait to be old enough to know better.

Statement on Sacramental Practices: a Gift

The *Statement on Sacramental Practices* is a gift of our church because it finally allows us to respond to those two-year-old hands that so spontaneously reach out to us as we preside at the table. The *Statement* has also become an "earthen vessel" for God, a channel for God's presence to touch the hands and hearts of all God's children.

In these moments, God is planting the seeds of memory in the hearts of even the youngest of our children. In these moments, God is whispering eternity: *I have called you by name and I know you. You belong to me.* Why? Because as we gather at the communion table, God sees in our children just what God sees in all of us: Children, come-home, bearing the burdens of the journey, with questions in our eyes, seeking the love and acceptance that is always the gift given.

To that I say, Amen.

+ + +