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SP = Statement on Sacramental Practices

Otherness in the Kingdom of God: Eucharistic Hospitality for the Church

Feast: Image of God's Kingdom

In the movie *Babette's Feast*, Gabriel Axel creates a human and moving image of the Kingdom of God as it sometimes breaks into this fragmented world of ours. As one might suspect from the title of his film, this in-breaking takes the form of a feast.

There are certainly many reasons why a feast is an appropriate image of God's Kingdom: it is an event which necessarily requires community; it is an occasion of abundance, even extravagance; and it is also a time when the demands of daily existence are temporarily suspended, and one is given the opportunity to relax in the grace of the world. To feast is to be re-oriented. To feast is to experience simultaneously intimacy, community and divinity.

Otherness in God's Kingdom

But there is another aspect of a feast (another aspect of the Kingdom of God) which often is not given much consideration. In Axel's film, this comes to light when an isolated, Danish Lutheran sect is faced with the dilemma of being hospitable to a person (Babette) who, though having sojourned among them awhile, ultimately embodies very different traditions and perspectives. The dilemma arises when Babette creates a banquet of foreign delicacies (from her experience as chef in a French restaurant) as an act of kindness toward the people who have taken her in and given her a home. Despite the generosity of her act, the foreignness of the meal begins to take on a life of its own, and soon it is rumoured that the whole thing might actually come from a witch's cauldron. In this movie, Babette's differences collide with the long-standing traditions of the faithful community. Radical *otherness* has entered the Kingdom of God.

In our society today, where so many different Christian communities have developed unique traditions, rules, and expressions of faith to provide meaning and continuity in their worlds, the goal of the life of faith sometimes becomes understood simply as obedience to community norms. Otherness, by default, then becomes viewed as something which is unhealthy or even bad.

Otherness and Eucharistic Hospitality

My intention in this brief essay is to examine the way in which the *Statement on Sacramental Practices* fosters an appreciation of *otherness* with regard to eucharistic hospitality in our church. My hope is that the act of welcoming people at the eucharistic feast because of their differences, can be seen not so much as something which threatens the community of faith, but rather as something which ultimately strengthens the community of faith.

In what is perhaps the foundational statement regarding eucharistic hospitality, Section 5.8 of the *Statement on Sacramental Practices* offers:

"In Baptism we are incorporated into the body of Christ, the church. In Holy Communion the church is nourished and strengthened. Therefore we speak of and practice communion of the baptized."

From this statement follow the more specific statements:

“ Baptized persons of Lutheran and other Christian faith communities are welcomed to the Lord’s table.” (SP 6.13)

and,

“Because of the universal nature of the church, Lutherans may participate in eucharistic services of other Christian churches. As a visitor, one should respect the practice of the host congregation.” (SP 6.14)

Thus, all baptized people, regardless of their particular faith tradition, are welcome to participate with us in the Holy Communion, even as we ourselves are welcome (with due respect) to participate in the eucharistic celebrations of other congregations. As Luther might say: the priesthood of all believers has simply gathered itself around the altar.

***Otherness* in the Communion of the Baptized**

In practice, however, *communion of the baptized* can have a different *feel* to it than one might initially expect from simply reading the preceding statements. I remember when a guest in our parish from the Roman Catholic tradition kissed the chalice offered her rather than drinking from it. The man beside her stiffened perceptibly. Because the woman’s actions were unfamiliar, they created a brief moment of awkwardness at the communion table.

Similarly, when a two-year-old boy (who was not yet communing) reached out and grabbed the host from my hand during the distribution, a number of people close by were taken aback. The following week, some work needed to be done to assure those who had been affected that the boy had not done anything wrong and that the Eucharist had not been disrespected.

Such incidents are peripheral—but very human—examples of what can happen when ‘communion of the baptized’ is practised with regularity in the parish. They also illustrate why *otherness* can sometimes be seen as an unhealthy or disturbing thing. When people from different backgrounds (or people from similar backgrounds with different expectations) gather together, there necessarily must be some awkwardness between them until initial peculiarities turn into familiar actions.

Discerning the Body

However, since our congregation instituted the practice of *communion of the baptized*, one year ago, one issue has come to light more commonly, and with greater concern attached to it, than any other. This stems from Paul’s words in I Corinthians and it goes to the very heart of the issue of *embracing otherness*.

Paul writes:

“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.” (I Corinthians 11:27-29)

The fear, for many at the parish level, is that others (guests from different traditions and even children in our own parish) might fail to correctly “discern” the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament, thereby bringing God’s damnation on themselves and violating the sanctity of the Eucharist.

While not wishing in any way to belittle reverence for the sacraments (which is, on one level, the creative element in the fear of damnation), it is important to note that a significant misunderstanding has occurred in the interpretation of Paul’s words in I Corinthians 11. This misunderstanding inhibits the ability of our congregation to enter into eucharistic hospitality with joy and thanksgiving, and it centres on Paul’s words: “For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.”

Now, at the time of the writing of these instructions, the practice of Holy Communion had become an exclusive event in the Corinthian Church. It seems that during the celebration of the Eucharist (at that time the Eucharist was a full meal) some Christians were dining abundantly and drinking to excess while others were going away hungry (I Corinthians 11:20-22). A feast was certainly occurring, but it was a feast without intimacy, community or divinity.

The paradox in our own time, of course, is that a phrase which Paul used to urge church members to *include* others became a phrase which, out of fearfulness, actually excluded others. The intent of Paul’s message somehow became turned around and the very sinfulness he condemned (the sin of exclusion), once again became the order of the day.

Eucharistic Hospitality: A Foretaste of the Feast to Come

The *Statement on Sacramental Practices* takes a significant step in returning to and restoring the eucharistic hospitality advocated by Paul. It recognizes that such hospitality grows out of an authentic willingness to embrace people because of their otherness, not in spite of it; and it seeks to provide guidelines for congregations which are concerned about how they might respect the body of Christ, as they gather around the altar in a pluralistic and complex world.

Ultimately, the *Statement* invites us to imagine that the Kingdom of God might be bigger and more gracious than we might have thought before. This, alone, can enable our gathering around the table to be a real *foretaste of the feast to come!*

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