

Eucharist Paper

For a short few months, I worked as the interim Director of Liturgical Music for a small Episcopal church-plant outside Richmond, VA. Each week, I stood at the front of the worship space in a school cafeteria and watched congregants come forward to tear off a piece of the common loaf and sip from the cup. I looked forward to one person, in particular, coming forward each week. She was about 3 years old with thin curly brown hair, fair skin and bright blue eyes. Her mother walked behind her in the single file line, and when they got close to the priest, she reached down and took the little girl's hands and shaped them into the form of a cup – the vessel of God's grace. The priest tore off a piece of bread too large for her little mouth and placed it in her tiny hands. With all ten fingers grasping that piece of bread, she dipped it into the cup held by the priest kneeling before her, pulled it back out of the wine and feasted on God's abundant grace in three big bites. This story, better than any other I know, articulates my theology of the Eucharist.¹

Theory

Being a member of the United Church of Christ, my Eucharistic theology is rooted in the reformed tradition. At the center of my Eucharistic theology is a belief that the grace of God is extended to and at work in all of Creation. I affirm St. Thomas Aquinas' conclusions that "everything that is at all real is from God" and "all things other than God are not their own existence but share in existence."² It is, therefore, arbitrary to draw distinctions between those creatures that receive God's grace and those that do not. Existence in itself, and every blessing flowing forth from Existence, is the grace of God.

¹ I will explain how later in this paper.

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Vol. 8 (1a. 44-49), Creation, Variety and Evil* edited by Thomas Gilby O.P. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 7.

Further, as affirmed by John Calvin, God has sewn a seed of religion in all humankind.³ That seed is alive in humankind, not at all dormant, but not fully realized except by the work of the Holy Spirit.⁴ This activation occurs at various moments in the life of individuals and for some the seed is not realized in this life. This leads me to ponder the relationship between God's work of salvation, which is inherently entangled with issues of justice and morality, and the Eucharistic ritual.

I call the Eucharist a sacrament because I believe there is issued therein a "special grace" from God to those partaking. In this meal, persons receive physical sustenance that nourishes the body and empowers the mind. All persons receive this nourishment, regardless of their religious commitments because of the processes by which God sustains human life. This is especially significant when we consider the significance of the meal to the hungry and poor, for whom nutritious food is not a given, as it is for so many congregants. In addition, participants in the Eucharistic ritual find more available to them than nourishment.

Those who share the Eucharistic meal find, first and foremost, Christ in their midst. Just as the gospels report Jesus to have gathered among the least likely while he walked on earth, so Jesus continues to gather not only amongst his followers, but with all those who come seeking strength and healing. While Christ may not be recognizable to some, as with his disciples on the road to Emmaus, Christ's presence is surely in the midst of those who gather to break Eucharistic bread in love and communion.⁵ This presence, most certainly, is the grace of God.

Second, it is not just the meal itself through which God imparts this special grace, but also the accompanying words, music and creative expressions that tell the story of Christ's life and the

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Translated by Ford Lewis Battles, Edited by John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960) 43-44.

⁴ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* edited by H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (New York: T&T Clark Ltd, 1999) 536-539.

⁵ Luke 24:13-35

last supper with his disciples. Just as the life of Christ demonstrates the great potential of humanity to live in right relations to others, the death of Jesus reminds humanity of its tremendous potential for destructive and horrific treatment of others. In Jesus' death, humanity is confronted with the suffering of every innocent person and called to be reoriented in a way that will serve the purposes of God and the good of all Creation.⁶ Therefore, the liturgical rites and rituals that accompany the Eucharistic meal ought to engage whole persons, in every sense, so as to communicate the destructive force of innocent suffering and the redemptive grace of Christ's resurrection.

A third grace imparted in the Eucharist is that of community. Here, many would say only the baptized truly experience community at the table. Instead, I believe that when Christ's story is told and God's love is announced, all people should be welcomed to receive it as their own in the form of the Eucharist. Not only that, Christ's presence and God's welcome should be visible in the faces of those Christians gathered at the table and in the voices of those who preside over the ritual. Where there is genuine welcome and unconditional acceptance, the Holy Spirit is most assuredly at work issuing sanctifying grace to the hearts of every person.

Context

It is now appropriate to consider the ways in which justice and morality are entangled with salvation. I believe that "salvation" for the modern person is not a question about eternity so much as it is a question of meaning. People living in the 21st century wonder if the world will be able to support human life in 100 years and if nuclear or biological warfare will end our species. People of this age also have fundamentally different understandings of "truth" than any other era in light of recent technological and social scientific advances. For these reasons, and many others, the salvific meaning people seek from God and religious faith is some assurance that their

⁶ Douglas F. Ottati, *Reforming Protestantism: Christian Commitment in Today's World*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) 77-78.

individual lives and the collective lives of their communities will be positively significant beyond the duration of their natural lifespan. Eucharistic liturgies and theologies, therefore, should reflect the ongoing struggles of humankind in relation to itself and the rest of Creation and offer glimpses of hope, not of a world beyond this one, but of God's redemptive power to transform this world through the work of the faithful.

Praxis

Eucharistic rites very naturally emphasize the connection between care for Creation, by which we receive the bread and wine customarily used in the Eucharist, and the responsibilities of those who accept God's grace. Namely, those presiding at the Eucharist might encourage all who partake of the Eucharist to remember the grain and the fruit from which the meal was produced and to recommit themselves to more sustainable environmental practices as individuals, families and communities.

Bread and wine do not occur in creation. God gives grains of wheat and grapes and soil in which they can grow. But someone must nurture stalk and vine, grind flour and knead dough, and press the grapes. Thus we eat at the Table of the Lord suggests cooperation between Creator and creature as we are called responsibly to tend, prepare, and share with one another.⁷

Eucharistic ritual might also emphasize God's gift of community received at the table. Communities might choose to gather around the table in their worship space, which is more naturally associated with the ways people eat in their homes or at social gatherings than passing trays through long rows of pews or filing single-file. When people are gathered at the table, they might be encouraged to look around and notice the diversity present in the community. For some

⁷ Laurence Hull Stookey, *Eucharist: Christ's Feast With the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press: 1993) 17.

communities, this diversity may be largely internal, relating to the different personalities present. For other communities, this diversity might be very visible in the different shades and contours of physical appearance exhibited by every person. Still others most intentional about inclusivity and blessed with the gift of diversity might see the fruit of God's creativity manifest in myriad ways. These diversities should be acknowledged and celebrated throughout the life of the congregation and especially during the Eucharist.

In this media-rich age, images often speak louder than words. Those presiding at the Eucharist might try silent Eucharistic services in which the stories and commitments of the community are narrated through images projected all around the table. These images might include the hungry, poor and marginalized of the world; these images speak to each individual and the community about the blessings of food and friendship and remind us of our responsibilities to those in need. Images of Christian saints and "local saints" might also be used to remind the community of those who have shaped and informed our faith and commitments.

In these ways and many others, persons come to experience the saving power of God in Christ at work through the Eucharist in our communities of faith. No firm belief in the grace and salvation of God is omitted from this theology. I seek to revitalize familiar expressions of historic faith in ways that enrich an understanding of and participation in God's work in the world. It might be helpful to look, specifically, at the texts used during the Eucharist each week in my own congregation and to consider the physical gathering.⁸

Before any words are spoken to initiate the Eucharistic meal, the minister issues an invitation to "anyone who wants to receive God's blessing." This is an acceptable invitation, but might be more significant if we offered an invitation to "all those who want to receive God's grace in Christ and commit themselves to live responsibly in care of God's creation." After this

⁸ These texts are attached and adapted from liturgies developed by the Iona Community

invitation, the gathered congregation leaves the pews to gather around the Eucharistic table at the front of the church. Those who are unable to join the gathering are told they will be served in their seats. This is problematic because the congregation is young and almost entirely able-bodied. There might only be a few on a given Sunday who are physically unable to come to the front. Not only that, the space where the community gathers is narrow and has a case of stairs, which would be very difficult to navigate in a wheel chair or with a walking aid.

The beginning prayer of invocation of the Eucharistic rite invites Christ to be among those gathered and acknowledges the diversity present in the body of Christ, both local and universal. The second part of the prayer acts as a brief confession when the people say, "Forgive us that we may forgive one another. Renew us so that, where we have failed, we may begin again." This is an appropriate blend of confession and commitment so that the liturgy does not become bogged down in penance, lest the community forget the implications of resurrection.

The Words of Invitation begin by recalling the last supper, which we have already said reminds those gathered of Christ's betrayal and friendship even with those who betray him. Here, the liturgy moves immediately to the ethical implications of this meal for those gathered. The liturgy refers to those gathered as "many grains of wheat" acknowledging the present diversity and also the synergy of these diverse people in Christ. The liturgy also remembers the saints who lived and died before this meal and have formed and shaped those gathered. Finally, in the Words of Invitation there is a call for those gathered to commune with creation and to be in solidarity with those who suffer.

The rite continues with the Story of the Last Supper, which is a traditional account of the Passover meal Jesus shared with his disciples, and serves to keep those gathered connected to the memory of Christ. Next is the Blessing of the Bread and Wine. This section of the rite begins, "Gracious God be present with us now," which is odd because the Spirit of Christ has already

been invoked. This repetition might signal to some that God has come and gone during the gathering, or to others that God's attention is not easily gotten and must be beckoned numerous times. The rite goes on to affirm the necessary coupling of the reception of grace through the Eucharist with responsible living and care for creation.

Next, the people say together the Lord's Prayer, which is the culmination of all the other words spoken in the liturgy. This prayer is the perfect example of one attentive to God and Creation. Finally, the liturgist says, "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us," which reminds those gathered that this meal was originally part of a Jewish festival with its own traditions and heritage. The closing line of the rite reminds those gathered of Christ's sacrificial life, but, sadly, does not remind the community of his resurrection. Stookey says, "The Eucharist is a feast in which we, with the risen Lord, incarnate the hope we have of a righteous realm in which Christ's sacrificial love destroys barriers among human beings and between humanity and God."⁹ An ending that held together the necessity of a life of sacrifice and the promise of redemption would strengthen this Eucharistic liturgy.

How is the image of a little girl receiving the Eucharist a perfect symbol of God's Eucharistic grace? Like the little girl, each of us comes to the table not knowing fully the sacrifices made for us to be there and the responsibilities that will ensue. Like the mother who molds her daughter's hands into a cup, each of us requires grace to receive God's grace. The priest kneeling before her is the image of welcome and hospitality every person should feel when they approach God's table. Those presiding at the Eucharist should embody the form of a servant, even as Christ who washed the feet of his followers at their last supper.¹⁰ Finally, this little girl, as she grows in the knowledge of Christ and the commitments of the community, carries the witness of God with her into the world as a healing agent of grace. She witnesses to God's grace, even now.

⁹ Stookey, 23.

¹⁰ John 13:1-11