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Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion

Welcome to Communion

Kristine Carlson

In the congregation where I serve as pastor, during the weekly Welcome, the presiding minister says to the gathered assembly, "All are welcome to the Table. It's the Lord's Table, and he invites you to come."

This is not the invitation I have always extended, or heard, in the Lutheran church. Brought to the font by my parents in Sunday worship when I was one month old, I did not commune (or even come forward for a blessing—that was not a practice in my home congregation) until I was confirmed at 15. Communion was once a month. At that time, in the late 1960s in Brooklyn, N.Y., where I was living, the Table was opening up in remarkable ways. Around the time I was confirmed, I remember my parents' surprised joy when they were invited to commune at a service they attended at the local Roman Catholic parish: Vatican II was encouraging new ecumenical hospitality at the Table. And I remember my congregation's gladness when Roman Catholics married to Lutheran members began to commune at our church; when they decided to have communion twice a month; when women could be ordained and preside at the Table.

During my 32 years of ordained ministry, the welcome to the Table has continued to expand. When I arrived at my first call, the congregation was having a conversation about lowering the age of communion to fifth grade and voted overwhelmingly to do that. In the next congregation I served, the age of first communion was third grade. My current congregation welcomes all the baptized—all ages, even infants—to the Table. In addition, communion is celebrated at many of our weddings and funerals, where the invitation is the same as on Sunday morning—"All are welcome to the Table"—and where I am often moved by the stories I hear from family members and friends who have not communed in years but are moved by the welcome to come, and experience a sort of "awakening" of faith, of yearning for God and for Christian

community. And, we have rejoiced that ordained gay and lesbian clergy can be partnered and preside at communion.

All in all, I would say that the main response I have heard over the years to this opening up of the communion table has been joy. The times I have heard sorrow expressed about the Table is when it is restricted or closed. My current congregation, for instance, is former Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, and I hear such sadness from members over not being able to commune in that denomination's congregations of their family and friends.

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I first encountered the issue of the relation of baptism and eucharist when I was serving as campus pastor at Oak Grove Lutheran School in Fargo, N.D. In the fall of 1996, 18 high school students came from mainland China for the year living in the dormitory, attending classes and participating in the life of the school. Their English was poor. None were Christian or familiar with Christianity. But daily chapel was required, so they came, including on Wednesdays when there was a weekly communion service. They sat, watching. I met with the students in a special religion class. In the early days of the first semester, we were getting to know each other. As the granddaughter of missionaries, I was grateful for this experience. But I was quite unprepared when, on the third Wednesday of the semester, serving bread in the weekly communion service, I looked up to see Violet, one of the Chinese students, with her hand held out to me. Behind her in the communion line were many of the other Chinese students. She said to me, "Please." So I served her and the others with joy and wonder and confusion on my part.

Afterward I talked with them, trying to explain our practices of baptism and communion. My inability with Chinese language, and their poor English, made this difficult. They came to religion classes all year; I took them to a neighboring congregation for Sunday worship so they could see baptisms. Only Violet was baptized. But they all kept coming to the Table. I didn't have the heart to refuse them, nor did the school. They loved sharing in the Meal; they weren't so sure about being baptized. They wanted to participate in communion, in part, to be not different from the rest of the students, teachers, and staff: they were different enough being Chinese in the Red River Valley. They talked movingly, with conviction, about feeling more a part of the community because of communion. They also gradually talked about feeling a sense of God—and even about coming to a relationship with God and a desire for being with God's people—in the Meal.

I left after that year and soon moved away from the Red River Valley. I have continued to ponder what happened, and the missionary character of the communion table we experienced together.

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Since that time and the publication in 1997 of *The Use of the Means of Grace*, there has also been an expansion of the gift and role of baptism in the congregations I have served—with a growing sense that baptism takes place in corporate worship and is central for us, along with practices that incorporate baptism more and more in our worship and lives. It's hard to imagine leading the Confession and Forgiveness from any place other than the font now, and the presiding minister often sprinkles the assembly in remembrance of baptism. We use Thanksgiving for Baptism during certain seasons. Water is in the font every Sunday, so that young and old can return to their Baptisms. Children are invited to the font when there is a baptism, and have spontaneously started helping the presider—holding the pitcher of water, the napkin, oil, and candle—and joining the procession of the newly baptized into the congregation. The language of our intercessory prayers turns to baptism. And in my preaching—both in children's sermons and regular sermons—I draw increasingly on baptismal theology in the proclamation of the gospel.

As the welcome to the Table has expanded in the congregations I have served, so has the sense of the gift of baptism and practices informed by that—a flourishing of both sacraments which gives me heart for this time when there is diversity among congregations concerning eucharistic hospitality. It seems to me we are in a robust place, sacramentally, to address the relation of baptism and eucharist. At Christ Church Lutheran, we keep saying “All are welcome to the Table.” This seems to us to be the Table invitation of our Lord, who came eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners. At the same time, as a congregation, we want to stir up a desire for Baptism—for entry into the community through baptism, and for the baptized life. And with people coming to faith, we seek to be patient in the journey; it is a process, not always in our control—but we keep seeking to be in as full a conversation as possible, and to keep giving ourselves away for the sake of the world, including the treasures of Word and Sacrament.

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