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Table and font: Who is welcome?

An invitation to join the conversation about Baptism and Communion

The Invitation to Holy Communion

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Often I am welcomed as a guest at the tables of others. Many of my hosts share backgrounds similar to mine, so our meals together have a kind of familiarity to the patterns of gathering, sharing and leave-taking. When my spouse and I host meals in our home, we delight in a diversity of guests whose meal practices sometimes differ from ours. While much is left unspoken among those with similar experiences, when we notice differences, hosts and guests happily seek to learn from one another about the intentions underlying what is done; we deepen relationships through stories that explore the details of our practices. In turn, I am more deeply aware of the potential power for encounter at table both with those I know best *and* with those strangers whose questions or differences send me to seek deeper understanding.

In the church, I experience something similar in the increasingly diverse community of people in worship. Long-term congregation members ('the baptized'), frequently are joined by those responding to modern-day Philips (John 1:46) who invite them to "come and see." Others are drawn by something within, their hearts urging as one woman recently said: "to find out what God is doing here." Even in Seattle, erstwhile capital city of the 'none zone' (when asked their religious identification, more people answer "none" in the Pacific Northwest than in any other region of the United States), people continue to enter worship services hungering for something to satisfy even vaguely recognized desires, wondering what the congregation might offer in response. I believe the church appropriately responds not by reserving the meal for the baptized, but by welcoming to the table all who are hungry in order that they may encounter Christ, tasting and seeing God's goodness in the meal of Jesus re-membered.

When the church speaks instead of "inadvertently" communing an unbaptized person who "comes to the table seeking Christ's presence" (UMG 37G), one readily infers that communion is a meal to which one gains access because of some prior action (in this case, presenting oneself or having been presented, for baptism). And even though the

guideline draws from a desire to strengthen a person's connection to Christian community and deepen her or his understanding of what happens in communion, this emphasis seems to make baptism into a means to an end—as admission to the meal—rather than focusing on baptism solely *as a means of grace*.

To keep from this misinterpretation, I wonder what could happen if the church attended less to the order of baptism and meal and, instead, leaned-in and more fully lived-into the sacraments as the gifts of grace they are. After all, the story of Jesus' last supper does not convey a spirit of cautious discernment about who should receive the bread and cup; rather it reveals a deep intention that Jesus' followers would gather repeatedly around this ritual meal to remember him both in the sense of calling him to mind *and* in the joining of all as members of this body newly put together (remembered).

As such, I seldom focus on the question, "Whom shall the church commune?" More helpful to ministry (and more connected to the Jesus 'event') would be to ask instead: "Who is invited to do all this, to remember Jesus, eating and drinking together at the table of the Lord?" Thus framed, stories in Scripture press us beyond fears that might otherwise constrict the circle. I think of Jesus' companions of old. I see Jesus welcoming sinners and dining with them (Matthew 11, Mark 2, Luke 15). I recall the radical hospitality shown in his encounters with the marginalized of the time: the lepers and demon-possessed, folks in collusion with Rome such as tax collectors and imperial officers, and women—even of Samaria. Further, I think of those whom I have met, those who have come to the table seeking Jesus who often express a greater passion than my long-baptized self generally musters. In our worship, sometimes for the very first time in their lives, they hear words of invitation to taste and see God's goodness. Hearing the call to remember Jesus, they stretch out their hands ready: Not to be "given communion" but to receive a gift of God's mercy through a morsel of bread, a sip of wine and those precious words, "for you."

Such hunger stirs in the hearts of many, who are not yet baptized and spiritual pangs often are missing in those brought to the font as early as the eighth day. Both instances (as well as the million mixes between) yield room for growth. And if we join in the kind of community Jesus intends, we may dwell with one another in such ways as deepen understandings of our life together. We will wrestle, not simply with questions about whom to commune or baptize, but how those sacraments nourish us for daily life. We will deepen our words of welcome to both bath and table, flooding ourselves with the grace God speaks in the Living Word, Jesus the Christ.

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