

Holy Communion under Quarantine

Unless one is over 100 years old, none of us has lived through such a serious world-wide pandemic. While we can stream our worship service on-line, the Lord's Supper poses a particular problem for Lutherans, who in the last fifty years have gone from quarterly to monthly to weekly communion in our congregations (especially on the East Coast). What should we do?

The first thing to say is that, outside of following the guidance of medical professionals, **there is no one "right answer" to this problem**, and we must be very careful not to project our anxiety upon others who may find other solutions to this practical problem. The frequency of the Lord's Supper is not fixed in the New Testament and is not part of the Ten Commandments, so we must not assume that what we do is the only right way. It is *adiaphora*, a word that does *not* mean that it is not important but rather means that we cannot clearly tell what is the right or wrong practice. Thus, we should not judge one another. In the *Formula of Concord's* article on *adiaphora* (art. 10), the concordists remind us:

We also believe, teach, and confess that no church should condemn another because the one has fewer or more external ceremonies not commanded by God than the other has, when otherwise there is unity with the other in teaching and all the articles of faith and in the proper use of the holy sacraments, according to the well-known saying, "*Dissonantia ieiunii non dissolvit consonantiam fidei,*"
"Dissimilarity in fasting is not to disrupt unity in faith."

Franklin Drews Fry, a long-time pastor in New Jersey, taught me an important method for approaching such matters: "**Give it your 'reverent, best guess!'**" It is reverent, in that we must study Scripture, pray, and beg God for guidance. It is best, in that we use our heads to

figure out the best thing to do. But it remains a guess, because we are ignorant, sinful mortals, not God. This means that once we make a decision, we should always be open to suggestions about what may be better.

Now, when it comes to the Lord's Supper, as I said, **there is no magic number of times to celebrate**. The fact that Roman Catholic priests were required to celebrate the Mass daily in Luther's day led the reformers to emphasize a comment from the ancient church, which described how the church in Alexandria, Egypt did not do this. The fact that most of us celebrate weekly does not necessarily mean that this is the only practice. Indeed, *not* receiving the Lord's Supper during Lent this year would remind us that we are in solidarity with those who were preparing for Baptism in the ancient church, who would first receive the Supper *after* Baptism on Easter Day. Perhaps this virus is forcing on us a better Lenten discipline to impress upon us once more just how precious the Meal is and how we are all in need of the waters of baptism.

In 1523, followers of John Hus in Bohemia posed a question to Luther about the sacraments, given that many of them were bereft of pastors as a result of their struggle with the church of Rome. Luther, giving it his "reverent best guess," responded with *Concerning the Ministry* (*Luther's Works* [LW] 40:7-44). There he reminded his correspondents that in each household the head of that household could preach and, in this emergency situation, baptize. But, for Luther, the Lord's Supper was somewhat different and was intended to take place in the Sunday gathering and not privately. He also had high respect for the public office of ministry, so he did not think that the Lord's Supper should be celebrated without a properly called minister. Given that the church in Bohemia could not receive such pastors, Luther advised them to do without pastors in the emergency. He wrote (LW 40:9): "For it would be safer and more wholesome for the father of the household to read the gospel and, since the universal custom and

use allows it to the laity, to baptize those born in his home, and so to govern himself and his according to the doctrine of Christ, even if throughout life they did not dare or could not receive the Eucharist. **For the Eucharist is not so necessary that salvation depends on it.** The gospel and baptism are sufficient since faith alone justifies and love alone lives rightly.”

Moreover, in the same letter, Luther points out that **the Supper is itself a proclamation of the gospel**, given that Christ commands it be done “in remembrance of me” and Paul states that “as often as we eat ... and drink ... we proclaim the Lord’s death.” Thus, the Supper is not some sort of separate, required spiritual magic but it is another form of the Word, what St. Augustine called a “visible word.” Thus, we must not confuse our desire to receive the Lord’s Supper with a kind of necessity that leads us away from faith and trust in God’s promises and toward a belief that worship is not really worship without the “mere performance of the work” of the liturgy. What matters is faith in the Word of God, who comes down from heaven and in aural and visible Word whispers, “You are mine,” to which faith answers: “I’m yours.”

Once we are freed of some sort of spiritual necessity for celebrating the Supper, we are much better prepared to discuss with one another how best to behave in this situation.

But here, rather than doing theology “by fiat” (“the Bible, Luther, the Bishop or I say it; you better believe it; that settles it”), we need to practice Christian conversation about these matters, remembering that line from Proverbs: “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.” Or, as Philip Melanchthon once put it: “Wir sind zum wechselseitigen Gespräch geboren” (We are born to back-and-forth conversation). In part this means admitting to the weaknesses in all of our practical solutions. So, what are our options?

First, some congregations and their ministers may decide not to celebrate the Lord’s Supper until the threat of this virus is over. The danger here, of course, is that people suddenly

get the idea that the Lord's Supper is optional even on days when we are healthy—even pointing to Luther for support, when in fact he was speaking especially to the emergency in the Bohemian Church.

Second, one could (like St. Thomas Episcopal Church, the famous African American Episcopal Church in Philadelphia) find a way to distribute the Lord's Supper as people drive up in their cars. Here we are in danger of turning the Sacrament into a bit of magic. Faith and proclamation would disappear as if the Sacrament were effective by the mere performance of the work. The church is not a drive-through restaurant but a Christian assembly, gathered around Word and Sacrament.

One could also, I suppose, send out bread and wine that would be “live streamed” consecrated by the pastor somewhere else. Here, too, the danger revolves around trying to create a virtual community and, again, turning the Supper into a bit of magic.

Another possibility might be to consecrate the elements and leave them on the altar for people to commune themselves as they come in individually to pray during the week. Here, too, the very communal nature of Holy Communion is in danger of being lost, and the meal becomes simply a support for individual piety rather than what it is: “Given and shed for *you*” [always plural in the Greek New Testament text].

Perhaps one of the ways to sort out our approaches is to ask, “Why do you” or “Why do I want to do this?” What's the point? I regularly warned my students that when it comes to the sacramental practices, the reformers saw two dangers. Either we make the sacrament into something effective by virtue of some work we do or virtue we possess (“Only if you're a believer is the sacrament effective”) or we make the sacrament into something effective “by the mere performance of the rite.” Even in an emergency such as what we face today, these dangers

are lurking, and such practices threaten to undermine the actual heart of the sacraments—and the proclamation of the gospel. At the heart of all these things is truly God’s undeserved mercy and love, on the one hand, and faith which is engendered and strengthened by them.

Timothy J. Wengert

16 March 2020

Addendum from Gordon Lathrup:

The only thing I would add is that for Lutherans it is not only that the sacrament is a sort of Word — it is the Word itself is sacramental: it is full of the presence of Christ, come “to do us good.” I think of that marvelous passage about what happens in the reading of the Gospel in Luther’s preface to the Church Postil. I want us to remember that Luther argued that when the Gospel-book is read and preached, we should know that Christ is here, coming to us or we being brought to him, present in the reading and preaching, doing to us now what the text says he did then: forgiving us, healing us, raising us from the dead: “If you pause here and let him do you good, that is, if you believe that he benefits and helps you, then you really have it. Then Christ is yours, presented to you as a gift. After that it is necessary that you turn this into an example and deal with your neighbor in the very same way, be given also to him as a gift and an example.” I love also especially that final “happy exchange” turn! So, in this time we may just cling to the sacramental word. Then, in a healthier time, we can carefully rebuild that wonderful Sunday eucharistic-frequency that has been built up so lovingly among us. But not the sacrament as required, not the sacrament as fetish.