

Easter without Eucharist. Feast or Fast?

Colleagues,

This time a bit of narrative theology. It's a letter from a ThTh subscriber (also a good friend from days gone by) about his efforts to "save" Easter in a controversy with his own pastor. I thought about captioning it: "The Natives are Getting Restless. Thank God!" But discretion prevailed and I opted for the milder one listed above. Granted his report is only one side of the story. If there is another side, we offer to publish it too.

Even so, Easter Joy!

Ed Schroeder

EASTER WITHOUT EUCHARIST: A FEASTLESS FEAST

The following is an account of a saga that I came to describe as "bad news-good news-bad news." The bad news is that our whole congregation is being excommunicated. The good news is it will be only for one day. The bad news is the one day is Easter.

Here's what happened. I serve on the Worship and Arts Board of my congregation, one of the 10 largest in the ELCA. It was during our February monthly meeting, during the pastor's report that, while going over plans for Lent, Holy Week and Easter worship, the following statement was made: "We (the pastoral staff) have decided that there will be no communion at any of our four services on Easter Sunday." The reason given was that because of the crowds (we expect 3000 worshippers), to preserve good order, and not have to eliminate different parts of the

liturgy, we will just not offer Holy Communion.

Alarm bells were going off in my head, and I protested that our own congregational history was that Easter was the one day for the last five years where communion was offered at every service. So we decided that HC would at least be offered at our 6:30 am sunrise service. This was a small step forward, but I was not satisfied.

Later, at a worship planning meeting, I asked a staff person where this decision came from. She told me it originated with our interim head pastor at a weekly staff meeting, and that our two other pastors then agreed with him. When this interim head pastor wandered into our meeting (to talk about hymn selection), I requested a meeting and set an appointment.

This pastor recently retired from a upper Midwestern, strongly Lutheran city, and is the published author of two books. He is a preacher who loves to preach, and does preach Gospel. For that I am grateful. But I feel that Eucharist is central to worship, and that Easter being the Feast of Feasts, any service that does not include HC is simply incomplete.

I had met him briefly at different church functions, but re-introduced myself as a Sacramental Lutheran. He responded that being from the Hauge tradition he upheld the primacy of the proclaimed Word.

I had a half-hour discussion with him in which I raised the following points: our own congregation's recent past; the ELCA Statement on the Practice of the Means of Grace; the Lutheran Reformation leaders' own declarations; and the ecumenical witness of uniting with other Christians around the world in the Easter Feast on Easter. I also felt it important to offer the real presence to guests and visitors, even C&E Lutherans (Christmas and Easter). And we never "make" anyone participate

in the Sacrament, but that by not offering it, we preclude it from those who desire it.

Among his responses were the following: "I know plenty of Lutheran churches who won't be having HC on Easter because of the crowds;" and "we wouldn't want anyone to come to the table just because they think it's the thing to do if others are going." And although he stated that he never refused HC to anyone at the table, at two different points in our conversation he raised the subject of "worthiness" and in so doing raised the hair on the back of my neck to Don King proportions.

He concluded, "we just come from different traditions." Too bad. I told him I wasn't used to being in the position of begging that I, my family, and our congregation participate in the Sacrament on Easter. I felt like I'd just had a conversation with a nice, amiable, friendly Norwegian brick wall. The pastors have decided. Thus spake Zarathustra.

At this point I had two questions:

1. Is not offering the Sacrament a way of pre-judging worthiness?
2. Is this a manifestation of old ALC-LCA-AELC differences that were unresolved and long buried in the formation of the ELCA?

In the month that followed, I did a lot of reading, thinking and praying. I decided I could not, and would not keep silent. At our March 15 board meeting I made the following presentation. I figured I'd listened to more than a few sermons in my years, and it was my turn to speak up. We were 40 minutes into our meeting, with six board members and the interim pastor present when I gained the floor.

I identified myself as a "liturgical purist", and then told a

story from "The Lutheran:" Q. What's the difference between a liturgical purist and a terrorist? A. You can negotiate with a terrorist.

Then I turned to the pastor and told him I honor him for his office, for his years of service to the church, and for preaching Gospel among us. But I could not let the decision to not include HC on Easter go unchallenged.

I shared some of my research in copies of portions of The LBW [=Lutheran Book of Worship] Manual on the Liturgy, written by my friend and mentor Carlos Messerli and Philip Pfatteicher. I read the whole section from p13+14 about the Easter focus of our worship and the passover connection to be made:

"The fullness of the church and the union of Christ with his people at no other time and in no other way becomes so real and dynamic as in the celebration of Holy Communion. It is there that the church really becomes the church, the body of Christ, and that Christ and his people are joined together. Easter thus becomes a continuing experience."

Think about Easter worship on four levels. First, the historical church. "The Holy Communion has been the central act of Christian worship since New Testament times." (LBW Manual on the Liturgy p199.) Consider the Nicene Creed's declaration of faith, "I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church." If we are willing to confess that, shouldn't we be doing that which unites us in the same meal, that makes us holy, both by the fullness of forgiveness that it offers and by setting us apart by marking us as Christ's own?

Think about the impact of the catholic/universal church. It is the Sacrament that unites us with Christians around the world, but if we really understand the catholicity of the church in

light of the power of God, we are also one with God's people of every time and place. Talk about breaking down boundaries! We are one with the Israelite pre-Christians who lived in the promise of the Messiah, one with the apostles, one with every Christian who has lived or ever will live. A recent guest speaker in our congregation talked about the eschaton, not only in light of the end-times, but as the assured future having an impact on our present reality. That is part of our participation in the Lord's Supper.

Second, the Lutheran Reformers always referred to Word AND Sacrament, never one without the other. The Augsburg Confession states, "others have accused us of abolishing the Mass, but we retain the Mass for all Sundays and festivals."

Third, our own ELCA's Statement on the Practice of the Means of Grace upholds HC as the "norm" for Sunday worship and was passed by a 97% vote in 1997.

Finally, not to have HC at every Easter service would be a reversal of our own record of the last several years. A former pastor (some 25 years ago) wrote in our Jubilee 50th Anniversary yearbook about how he had attempted to move our church to a more central celebration of Eucharist and saw that by our weekly schedule it was still on the periphery of our worship, and concluded, "that ought not be so."

Several members' reactions to not having HC on Easter:

1. "But Easter's a Festival!"
2. A member widowed 2 years ago told of how her family had gathered from all across the country at Christmas and noted how disappointed they were that the worship they attended then did not offer HC, she added, "and now Easter, too?"

I also noted how my two daughters, now 11 and 7, noticed the difference in worship from our former home congregation to our home church here. About three years ago, one of them asked as we entered church for worship, "Dad, is there communion today?" When I had to shake my head no, she said, "we went from a church where there was always communion to one where there never is." I could not defend or explain that and I was not looking forward to doing the same for EASTER.

I closed by reading three verses of LBW hymn 134, Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands, Luther's own great Easter anthem.

Verse 3 makes the Passover connection explicit.

Verse 4:

So let us keep the festival to which the Lord invites us;
Christ is Himself the joy of all, the sun that warms and lights us;
Now his grace to us imparts eternal sunshine to our hearts;
The night of sin is ended. Hallelujah!

Verse 5:

Then let us feast this Easter day on Christ the bread of heaven;
The Word of Grace has purged away the old and evil leaven;
Christ alone our souls will feed; He is our meat and drink indeed;
Faith lives upon no other! Hallelujah!

I then introduced a motion to include HC at all of our Easter services. Discussion followed, and as you can imagine, the interim head pastor had several things to say refuting my irrefutable arguments. First he said, "well, you kind of put the preacher in a box when you limit him (or her) to only 10-15 minutes. The sermon is important, especially on a day like Easter when there are so many visitors. The Word is a two-edged sword; a strong proclamation is absolutely necessary."

Another statement was that sacramental churches are not growing. Roman Catholic, Episcopal, and sacramental Lutheran churches are not growing, and the fact that ELCA headquarters in Chicago tends to be sacramental is part of the problem why the ELCA isn't growing. Only places like Burnsville, MN that have gone completely contemporary are growing.

When asked if the pastors would go along with us if we passed the resolution, he said, "Sure, we'll do whatever you want, but when you tell the pastors where to lead, pretty soon they'll back off and quit leading, and then what have you got?"

At one point he asked, "you've quoted your experts, but is it scriptural?" I thought to myself "isn't Luther grounded in Scripture?" but was too flabbergasted to quote Acts 2 right after Peter's Pentecost sermon (which as the greatest sermon in the history of the church takes us how long to read?) "and they continued steadfastly in the Apostles' teaching, in the BREAKING OF BREAD, and in prayer."

I also told him I regarded the preaching ministry most highly, but not to the exclusion of the sacramental presence of Christ himself. He told me, "It's not magic, you know." I responded that it was one of two Sacraments, the first, baptism, being the entrance rite of each Christian into the church, and the Eucharist, in which our baptismal covenant is renewed regularly, an ongoing process of death and resurrection. "As OFTEN as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." Now there is an expectation of the eschaton impacting the present!

The time came to vote, and the motion was defeated 3-3. However, proving I'm no terrorist, I offered a substitute motion to include HC at the 11:00 final service of the day, saying that it was a matter of faith and discipline for my family to be able to

attend Eucharist on Easter, and that I hoped it would be at my home church. *[Ed's note: by the author's own metaphor, a liturgical purist will not negotiate; a terrorist will. So what is he really? The ancients had a word for this: All comparisons limp.]*

That motion did pass, unanimously, so the end result is that we will have two services with HC and two without. It is a compromise, perhaps a small token victory, and with that I can be happy, but never satisfied.

My heart grieves for a congregation that will not be able to avail itself of the gift of Christ himself on the highest festival of the Christian year. To me that makes Easter a feastless festival, a festival fast. Isn't that oxymoronic?

Do we invite company for Thanksgiving, and enjoy the fellowship, company, preparations, and talk about how wonderful it smells without ever feasting? That would never do.

And which of us would invite guests into our home without eventually asking them if we could get them something to eat or drink. I submit the real hospitality the church has to offer is the gift of bread and wine, not coffee and doughnuts. Or is that the new Lutheran Sacrament?

And while holding the preaching of the Word in the highest regard, isn't it the preacher's task to connect us to Christ and not the preacher? The Sacrament is not magic, but it is the real presence of Christ, involving the senses of taste, smell, touch, and seeing as well as hearing. It ties us directly to Christ and to each other. Can we really profess belief in the Real Presence while practicing the Real Absence?

What disturbs me also is that we want to maintain the Brief Order of Confession, even on high festival days ("absolutely

essential on Easter," our interim head told me), and the practice of passing the peace, when the real reasons these things are included in the liturgy is part of the preparation for the Meal. If we want to keep these, and the lily procession, the liturgical dancers, the brass choir, band, organ and choirs, all good though they may be, and not keep the Feast, haven't we, like Esau, sold our inheritance for a mess of pottage? Preaching is important, but it is not a Sacrament. *[Ed's note: J. Pelikan once told us seminarians a half century ago that eucharist-shy Lutherans were folks willing to settle for a "pot of message."]*

Does everything in worship exist only as an appetizer for the main course, the sermon? Is this typical of what's going on in the ELCA? Is Hans Nielsen Hauge still the epitome and arbiter of Lutheran tradition, even more than Luther? Is this a regional happening, "Word Alone" literally?

One of our pastors told me about the weekly celebration of Eucharist, "You can get by with that on the East Coast." I am not attempting to take over the leadership of our church, but I am trying to change our worship culture in order to make Word and Sacrament a reality, the norm, not the exception. And I will forever witness to our pastoral leadership and all others that this is the course we need to follow to be faithful to our heritage. Are church growth and faithfulness incompatible goals?

Luther called the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper "a brief summary of the Gospel." I would add that it is a pure distillation. "Given for you," Christ said and Luther emphasized. The Eucharist is the church's real "Hope Diamond," a gem with many facets that glisten when examined closely. It needs to be discovered anew regularly, not hidden away on some shelf in a museum.

I recently discovered an English poem from 1635.

*Christ was the Word that spake it,
He took the bread and brake it;
and what the Word did make it,
that I believe and take it.*

That's it, Ed. There are more stories to tell, this is just one. I appreciate the opportunity for feedback. Peace and Joy back at you! I hope to stay in touch.