

# Eucharistic Community: A Canadian Case Study

Colleagues,

Two weeks ago Marie and I were in British Columbia, Canada. Main reason was an invitation from ELCA people out in the northwest corner of the USA. They picked Victoria BC—"across the creek" from Seattle/Tacoma—as their conference venue and asked me to speak on the theme "Mission – Inside Out." Pat Keifert was on the program too. Each of us made three presentations. But that's just the context for what follows. Before the event we spent an overnite with Seminex confrere Brian Heinrich, "street priest" in the scudzy Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. His support community is the Lutheran Urban Mission Society [LUMS]. Just one year ago (ThTh #99, May 4, 2000), we posted Brian's own words about his life and work. There now exists a LUMS video of this ministry among the rejects, "Diary of a Street Priest." *[If interested, contact the LUMS office @ 604 682 2362.]* For the last two years seminarian Matthew Senf has been Brian's colleague on the streets of East Vancouver. We got acquainted with Matty on location last month, and got his permission to reprint his essay from the LUMS Newsletter of Spring 2001. Here it is.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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# ***“STREET MINISTRY”***

***by LUMS Seminarian Matthew Senf***

*Now the tax collectors and sinners gathered about Him to hear his words. But the Pharisees and teachers of the law muttered, “this man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” (Luke 15:1-2)*

*LUMS confesses itself to be a Prophetic, Eucharistic community. What is that supposed to mean? In the last Newsletter Pastor Brian wrote about what it meant to be prophetic, both as a community and as a people, in the conditions that contextualize the LUMS mission and wider society. I thought, this time around, I might take a stab at reflecting on what it means to us as a community, and to me as an individual, to be “Eucharistic.”*

*We, as Christian people, often marvel at the “radicalness” of Jesus’ life and teachings. Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, has been claimed as an example by almost every grass roots movement of change and social justice that has ever come about. From environmentalists to radical feminists, from social revolutionaries to labour movements, the words and thoughts of the Saviour of humankind have been used to inspire, to teach and to awaken, and I think, rightfully so. We, as Christians, rejoice in and celebrate Jesus’ boundless graciousness. We celebrate the fact that the gospel Jesus preached was a word of good news to sinners, not a word of congratulations to the righteous. We know and confess publicly these realities every time we worship and yet I think that a true and deep understanding of just how outrageously radical Jesus was within the context of both His culture and religion, remain somehow not fully appreciated by the vast majority of Christians. I think that, although we realize that Jesus was considered a complete heretic by His own tradition, our common understanding of His ministry does not reflect an empathy with that reality.*

Jesus wasn't considered radical and a wee bit "weird" by the "religious establishment" (read "church") and society of His day, rather He was considered a complete reactionary who engaged in all manner of sacrilegious activity and who at every turn subverted all the traditional teachings that popular religion and society held dear! Of all the issues that Jesus made His own in the short time that He walked among us, none were considered more volatile and condemned with greater indignation than His position on table fellowship. For me, this is where "being Eucharistic" begins!

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life, those who come to me will never go hungry, and those who believe in me will never be thirsty... All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but the will of Him who sent me. And this is the will of Him who sent me that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but shall raise them up at the last day... . No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them." (John 6: 35, 37-39, 44)

In these words we hear Jesus extending the invitation to all, to receive him, to be in him, to turn from self-destruction and to live. In these words we hear that it is the Father who draws His children to His Anointed and that those who are drawn by the Father will not be driven away. These are words of grace! These are words of hope. In His day, these words were heard by the "church" as contemptuously heretical. That Jesus could be suggesting that He was the bread of life, that all who came to Him would be lifted up and that those who came to Him were called by the Father, was blasphemous enough. What was truly beyond the minds of the Pharisees and priests of Jesus' day, however, was not that He said these things (many had said worse) but it was the fact that He did them. Jesus ate with outcasts, sinners, and the wretched and marginalized. And in

antiquity one was whom one ate with. This radical view of table fellowship was so offensive to the religious elite of Jesus' day because it was inclusive of "sinners." It was seen as defiling the righteous because of the unworthiness of those who were ritually unclean and outcast. Jesus' position was so insufferable because He showed, in practice, that no one was more worthy to eat with God, or God's people, than anyone else. The only word that I can come up with to describe this theology is "inclusive." Jesus included those whom the "church" had thrown away.

It has been my experience that this radical call of inclusivity is as objectionable to many in the church today as it was in the second century. It sometimes seems that although we are reading the words, we are missing their meaning.

I have heard it said that the Eucharistic practice of LUMS is to commune "unrepentant sinners." I have engaged some in discussions about this. These discussions have always been amicable and sincere and have usually culminated in prayer and goodwill, but the lingering sense that I have is that, for those who disagree with our position, the impeding issue is one of legality and not of grace. It is often difficult for me not to draw parallels between my own experience and the experience of our Lord with His institutions and traditions. Without exception, every time I discuss an "inclusive" theology of the Eucharist with anybody, they inevitably and ardently agree, as I do, with Augustine's notion that the sacraments are "the visible signs of invisible grace." Somehow though, there always seem to be conditions attached to that grace. There always seems to be an "us / them factor" which separates those who can from those who can't or at least really shouldn't. Why is that, I wonder, and how does it speak to our understanding of grace? Who are the sacraments for? What are they intended to do? How should we engage them? How and with whom should we celebrate

*them? What does it mean, in the Eucharistic context, to have a repentant heart, a contrite and broken spirit before the Lord? Where do baptism, church membership, confirmation and confession enter the Eucharistic equation?*

*These are questions that we have been praying and talking much about down at the mission these days. How inclusive should we be? Should we deny some the Holy mysteries, and what should be the criteria for that denial? After much prayer and discussion I am always drawn back to words like those spoken by our Lord in that synagogue in Capernaum or those that He spoke at the table with the twelve the night of His betrayal (Mark 14: 22-25) or those He spoke in the 25th chapter of Matthew.*

*Sisters and brothers, the table is open! There are no conditions which one person can place upon another to deny them access to the sacrament. Those who would purport such conditions are advancing a theology of works and not of grace. When one argues for a pre-requisite to table access one is, in fact, arguing that there are ways one can make oneself worthy enough to accept the body and blood of our Lord on their own merit. A heart willing to draw near to Christ is the appropriate response to the Eucharistic invitation; a mind that somehow believes itself to have attained the right to approach the sacrament, is not. There should be no earnest Christian in need of reminding that nothing makes us worthy enough! For by grace we have been saved through faith. It is not anything that we have done but rather it is the gift of God. (Ephesians 2:8) And that, my dear friends, is the word of God and the good, good news!*

*The Eucharist is that visible sign of God's grace that is available, and should be accessible to all, to the holiest of saints and the most wretched of sinners. The report in the gospels of the origin of the meal testifies clearly to this.*

(See: Matthew 26:17-30, Mark 14:18-25, Luke 22:15-23). Does anyone read anything in any of these gospels about Christ reviewing the worthiness of His disciples before celebrating His last meal with them? I surely don't, and I must believe that we are all aware of what kind of characters are seated at the Lord's table. Even until the end, this motley band of rough, ignorant sinners spends its time bickering about who's going to be first in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 20: 20-28, Mark 10: 35-45, Luke 22: 24-27) and when the end finally does come, they can't deny the Lord, or each other, fast enough (Matthew 26: 69-75, Mark 14: 66-72, Luke 22: 56-62, John 18: 25-27).

Since we know then that the meal, and indeed our ultimate salvation, of which the meal is a foretaste, are gifts of grace that can in no wise be humanly attained, and since we have clear evidence, in all the gospel records, of the worthiness and "moral character" of those who shared in our Lord's last meal, why do we insist on limiting access to the feast? What makes us think that we can do the work of God in seeing into the hearts of His children deep enough to know what their mind and soul and heart is as they approach the table? And let us be sure that this is exactly what we do by imposing conditions of access. We do nothing less than judge who is worthy of grace and who is not! We are saying, sincerely perhaps, with humility I'm sure, but saying none the less, "Jesus might be the Host of the meal and we know His attitude regarding it from the record of the gospels, but we're just going to make sure that anyone answering Jesus' invitation gets checked out by us first!"

What about being "drawn by the Father"(Jn. 6:44)? What about "I shall lose none of all that He has given me"(Jn. 6:39), what about "Those who come to me I will never drive away"(Jn.6:37)? Who in the church is ready to judge whom God calls to Christ? Or better yet, who in the church is ready to drive away those

whom God has called to Christ? And friends, is there anyone whom God has not called to Christ?

People often cite the words of Paul from his first letter to the early church at Corinth in the discussions I have had around the issue of table access. I feel compelled to mention that in almost every theological discussion I have ever witnessed, the words of blessed St. Paul are used to defend completely opposing positions with alarmingly equal authority and effectiveness. I must say that I hear Paul speaking with different voices on this issue across his letters and so consider one group of texts from one particular context not to be exhaustively authoritative for the whole issue in all its circumstances. That having been said, Paul clearly states in 1 Corinthians 11: 27-29:

“Therefore, whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner is guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the Body of the Lord, eats and drinks judgement on himself.”

I’m still praying about what Paul means by “Whoever eats and drinks in an unworthy manner...” Since we know that we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and thus we all are unworthy, I can only assume that Paul is writing here about those who knowingly and willingly profane the sacrament. The sacrament is not to be profaned! Simple. I have never in my life, either in outreach ministry, parish ministry or mission ministry seen anyone knowingly and willingly mock it. I have seen the transcendent experience of the liturgy of communion move people to tears, to joy, to deep reflection and even to deep contrition and regret, but not to mockery. I find myself unable to understand what Paul means by “unworthy”! Perhaps

baptism is what makes us worthy enough to eat with Christ? Can we be sure that all who ate with Christ during His ministry or even at the last supper itself were baptized? I must confess to a terrible difficulty with Paul's use of the word "unworthy" in this case. What about discerning the body? Is attending the meal but refusing to partake to prove a theological point, as has been done in our community, appropriate discernment? If my neighbour invites me to dinner and I thankfully accept only to sit at his table and refuse to eat what I am offered, what does that say about me and the way I respect my host?

I wrote in the beginning that the table is open and that there are no conditions that one person can put upon another. The important element here is the irrelevance of human judgement! The Lord alone knows the hearts of those coming to His banquet (refer again to John 6). It is His work, and that of the Holy Spirit, to examine, convict, forgive and redeem those hearts. However earnest and faithful a pastor or elder or brother or sister in the faith is, they cannot, except in the case of a confession—and then the way is clear—judge who is appropriately prepared and who is not! What is risked when one person sets the conditions of access for another is the impeding of the work of the Holy Spirit. What we fail so often to understand is that not only are the sacraments "visible signs of invisible grace," they are also the means by which grace is visibly imparted to those called to receive it. Sometimes, and I have witnessed this, the deeply moving and transcendent experience of the liturgy and the sacraments are exactly what bring about the conversion in a hardened heart.

Paul is right when he counsels that we ought to examine ourselves. This seems to me to be another of those terribly obvious points. It is imperative that we discern the body, absolutely, and for those who have been instructed, it is a curse to approach the altar with an irreconciled heart, but



what of the stranger in our midst? What if someone approaches and we don't know them? And this is where the particular nature of my Eucharistic theology is born. In outreach, street, frontlines, whatever you want to call it, mission ministry, the stranger among us is 75% of those we minister to. We cannot know where their heart is, we cannot know what they have done and if they are sorry for it, but what we do know is that they are there and the one thing that I'm sure of is that I didn't invite them; I work for the one who invited them! Christ is the Host, we are merely working the feast, not putting it on, we don't make up the guest list, Jesus does that and as we read in John 6, he "will never drive away those whom the Father has called."

So how then do we, as Christian people, discern the body in a way that respects, honours and maintains its integrity? Well, there is ample instruction, for example in the good news according to Matthew. Matthew 25 is one of the guiding scripture texts of LUMS. In this chapter Jesus is depicted on the day of judgement separating the sheep from the goats (righteous from unrighteous) and what does he say to those on His right? What rule does the King of Kings use to discern between those who truly love Him and those that don't? Does it have to do with the regulations that Paul lays out in his letters, or the laws of the Pharisees, or good Lutheran theology or sacramental propriety? I don't think that it does, what do you think?

"...Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the Kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you fed Me, thirsty and you gave Me to drink, I was a stranger and you invited Me in."  
(Matthew 25:34-35)

Not: "I was hungry and you offered me instruction in the

*catechism so that one day I could be baptized, confirmed, confessed and then eat the bread of life!"*

*Not: "I was thirsty and you told me that I had to examine my conscience so that I wouldn't curse myself by approaching the altar."*

*Not: "I was a stranger and you told me I had to interview with the Pastor and transfer my membership and update my confirmation records."*

*I have begun to recognize, as I stated above, that within the church, there are as many styles and methods of ministry as there are members in the body. God calls each of us to the "universal priesthood of believers" not because He requires just any old body to fill a robe but because there is a plan within which each of our unique gifts and ways of being can further the cause of the gospel. Sometimes, it seems to me, the particular situation in which the church finds itself requires a radical departure from its traditional position. Traditionally the church has taught that baptism was the appropriate covenant within which believers were to partake in the sacraments. This is a teaching which I have obeyed in my personal life because I see its wisdom; I understand the order and propriety of it. The teaching of the church as regards baptism is a declaration of its profound will and hope to have all people washed in the waters of forgiveness and redemption. I celebrate this declaration and indeed confess that my hope and the hope of the church, in this regard, are one and the same.*

*Having said this, I see a place where the means of the tradition must make way for the ends of its purpose. It would be our greatest joy, and indeed is our most profound hope, that all who passed through the doors of LUMS were baptized into the*

church. This is a hope that, by grace, has been rewarded on occasion. This hope, however, is tempered with the very real, very pressing realities of time and circumstance. There will be many who will come to us only once, maybe twice. With many of those who come to us we may only have a few moments, we may be their last shot at the gospel, we might only have a brief window of opportunity to get them to understand that God loves them, accepts them, wants life for them, and wants them to turn away from the things that destroy them, because they might very well be dead by the time we get back to them.

If you think I'm exaggerating, pick up a copy of the LUMS video, "Diary of a Street Priest." Of the people of the neighbourhood who are featured on the tape, at least 6 of them are now dead, and that's the ones we know of! That's almost a 30% mortality rate. Can you imagine what would go through my head if the last thing I ever said to Deliah as we visited her on the HIV ward at St. Paul's, or Alex, or George as they slowly wasted away, was "Sorry but the grace of God (as manifested in the holy communion) is only available to those who are worthy and you just don't quite fit the bill!" Could any of us look into the eyes of our Redeemer and account for such a theology?

My tone may seem disrespectful perhaps, or my language antagonistic, righteous even. I'm still learning the lessons of humility. And isn't that what this is about, humility? Is it not the church, in its effort to protect the sanctity of the meal, that ends up excluding those who are invited (see Luke.14: 12-14) and is not the protection of that sanctity, as well meaning as it might be, an act of hubris, of pride? I so often hear bragging about our superior Lutheran theology and indeed I have often been the one doing it. This pride, this idea that we know the only right way, is what leads us to think that we can govern the kingdom of God! The truly unique element

of our great Lutheran theology is its celebration of Grace as the pre-eminent movement of God toward humankind. Should we not ask ourselves, "How are we manifesting that in the world"? If the casual observer were examining our Eucharistic theology in praxis, with its pre-requisites and conditions, they might surely be convinced that, in fact, we are not!

What is the foundation of grace? What is its nature?

In this I can only know what I have felt and witnessed. Grace reaches out always, grace hopes nothing and offers all things, grace seeks not something worthy to invest itself in, but rather seeks something to invest worth in. Grace will not yield to reason or falter in purpose or surrender to rejection. Grace is the movement of the divine impulse...grace is our Imago Dei. Grace is why we are a church in the first place! Grace is why any of us are called to the table and grace is ultimately what makes salvation possible! Christ, who was grace personified, showed us a radical model of table fellowship for which he was continually derided by those who upheld the rules and the tradition of His time. What was His motivation? When I read verses like Luke 15:1-2, I can hear that "muttering" and I don't like it! I don't like that in all this time we are still fighting the same small battles and that the fields in which we fight them are the lives of those for whom Christ has come!

The "Eucharistic Policy" of LUMS is not, as some of our brothers and sisters have suggested, "to commune unrepentant sinners." It is not our policy to mock the sacrament any more than it is our policy to determine who has sinned, how grievously they have sinned and what judgement should be passed upon them. Our policy is to preach the gospel that Christ has come to us to save those who are drowning in their own destruction, drowning in the ocean of a world that considers them worthless and denies their very humanity. The gospel we

*preach at LUMS is the gospel of the grace of God, extended to ALL people for the forgiveness of sins, not just the ones who look like us, talk like us, dress like us, have the same theology as us...ALL of us! We attempt to do so with action as equally as with word. That we will fail many times is inevitable, that we will offend the theological notions of sacramental propriety of some is certain, but that we will, in our broken and inadequate way "bring in the blind and the lame to fill our Father's house," that we will "do to the least of us what we do to God," that we will "never drive away those whom the Father has sent us" is as sure as the gospel itself.*

*May the peace of the radically welcoming Saviour of all humanity be with you.*