

From The Rev. James Farwell, PhD

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I invite you, under the conditions of quarantine, to think on these things. I certainly am thinking on them myself. They are offered especially for Anglicans, Episcopalians in particular, Episcopal clergy particularly in particular, leaders of a church that has been thirsty for the “innovative” of late, and are therefore ready to leap into all manner of peculiar practices to get the Eucharistic elements to people, especially eager to do so as Sars-CoV-2 puts a hold on gathering together in shared space.

1. I am a great proponent of the Eucharistic recovery of the 20th century liturgical movement. No one is more supportive of the Eucharistic center of the Lord's Day than I am. No one. My own spirituality, Incarnational to the core, is eucharistically centered. I lean to the Catholic end of “Catholic and Reformed.” That said... the Anglican commitment to Christ's presence to us in Word and Sacrament is worth pondering in this moment. The Eucharist is Word and Sacrament. Let me say that again. The Eucharist is Word and Sacrament. WORD. And Sacrament. Beware the fetishization of the Sacrament. Must we suddenly violate all principles of sacramental theology or canonical and rubrical order to make the Sacrament available to everyone in peculiar ways under quarantine? Are we wholly deprived because the Word alone is available to us for a time? I think you know the answer. (For those of you who are really liturgical nerds, imagine applying the doctrine of concomitance, in which we affirm the full presence of Christ in either bread or wine, to the Eucharist itself, in which the full presence of Christ is available in both Word and Sacrament....)

2. The sacrament is crucially a gathering of the social assembly, bodily, around material things. We priests do not consecrate the Eucharist alone. Nor is Eucharist consecrated or received virtually. The loss of the Eucharistic assembly for a time is a real loss to all of us. Imagine the celebration when we can gather again! But... do we serve the sacrament by gathering two or three people to fulfill the letter of the law

as others watch online? (Yes, “where two or three are gathered” but that’s not the point here.) Or by distributing that consecrated bread and wine to be consumed privately by an individual or a family unit? (Remembering that the family constituted by the celebration of the sacrament is not the biological family....) Might the Offices, not to mention many other devotional and meditative practices, suffice for a time? Are we suddenly not ourselves, the Body of Christ, because we cannot receive the Body of Christ in the sacrament? (I do believe we are still baptized, still the Body of Christ....)

3. Related to the foregoing. God’s converting work in us, as Augustine and Gregory Nyssen and many others knew, is the conversion and reorientation of our desires. Might we embrace our Eucharistic desire, during this period under quarantine when we cannot gather, as a motivation for our prayer, an incitement of our longing for God? Might this opportunity to cultivate our longing for God be a gain that emerges from the loss of the Sacrament for a time? Might we sit with that longing, meet God in that longing? (In the ancient wisdom: that which we are seeking is causing us to seek...) Sounds suspiciously like the work of a God who’s always in the business of bringing resurrection out of death.... But maybe I’m wrong.

4. The eminent Robert Taft, S.J., Byzantine Rite Roman Catholic Archimandrite, of blessed memory, one of my mentors, I paraphrase as follows. Because I am on an airplane and don’t have the book in front of me. (All is not lost: I have a delicious beverage - speculate as you will - and a bottle of hand sanitizer.) Taft: The point of the Eucharist is not the changing of bread and wine but the changing of you and me. Is God unable to change us WITHOUT the bread and wine? Might God be able to work in us through a period of sacramental deprivation? Even through it? (See #3.)

5. For years I have tried to teach students that you do not understand the sacraments if you cannot think BOTH/AND. The Eucharistic table is a table like no other table. AND the Eucharistic table is like every other table. The Eucharistic elements are special and singular in that there above all other places and times, we

see what God is doing in ALL places and times. Here's the question, then: do you think if we do not gather at the Eucharistic table like no other table that God is no longer at present at all other tables, i.e., at all other places and times? Is it not the case that God's presence to all places and times is the non-binary anchor of this non-binary relationship between the Eucharistic table and every other table, actual and metaphorical? (Hint. Revelation 21: 21-23. Another hint: Meister Eckhart's prayer, "Oh God, deliver me from God....")

Think on these things. May we gather again around the Holy Table very soon. In the meantime, look for the Tables around you and among you. God is still at the Table that is spread among us in our hearts, in our prayers, in our service.

Welcome to the Feast that does not end, the love of God from which and from whom we are never separated, even without the Sacrament.