

Pushing back from the Table

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Surprise – what I didn't miss

I will begin with a surprising confession. Well, it was surprising to me at least. I have not presided at Eucharist since March 15 and I haven't really missed it. Maybe it is because I have been busy trying to cope with all of the changes and learning the new skills needed "to take the church online" or maybe there is something deeper going on. I am historically a eucharistic person. As a priest, I rarely led the office in parish work, opting to have the eucharist on a regular schedule. At certain times in my life I would be at eucharist several times a week. So it was very surprising to me that I did not feel great anguish at the thoughts of not presiding for an indefinite period of time. Eucharist was central to my living of faith and then it wasn't.

Why?

While many of my colleagues were trying to find alternative and safe ways to have eucharist with their communities, I never felt the compulsion. I entered into conversation and gave feedback and asked questions, but I didn't really enter into the desperate search. I wondered if I was burned out. Was I losing my sense of priestly vocation? But I was engaged in learning new ways to reach out to my community and beyond. I was convinced that God was doing a new thing and felt oddly free to express myself liturgically in new ways. I was exhausted but still engaged. I felt overwhelmed and excited all at the same time. So what was going on with my shift in eucharistic thinking?

I wondered, maybe my outlook is more about sacramentality than particular sacraments? Maybe I am more of a person who sees the sacred in all things and not only in the particular sacraments? Maybe constantly repeating to folks that "sacraments are an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace" had led me to see those signs all around me?

I do think that this is so, but I also think that more is/was going on in my head and heart. I have a multitude of jumbled thoughts looking for an organizing principle. So I turned to the work of David Clines and his question: “Why is there a Book of Job and what does it do to you if you read it?” and asked myself why we have eucharist at all (what is it supposed to do) and then the inverse of Clines’ question: what happens when we don’t have it?

As this is a reflection paper, and not a book, I am not going to attempt a history of the eucharist and its origins in the early church community. But I will share some of my thoughts, and mostly questions, about why there is a eucharist.

It shapes community and identity – The eucharist shaped the community and identity of the early church. The radical sharing of a meal was very much a lived sign of the gospel. It enacted for all to see the good news of Jesus Christ. It was and is radical in breaking boundaries, as Paul would suggest, between male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free. In what ways does the eucharist shape community and identity now? How is it a lived sign? Are there other ways we are being shaped and re-formed?

It is thanksgiving – Those who have taken a basic course in the sacraments have learned that the term for eucharist comes from the Greek for thanksgiving. In the eucharist we give thanks for the gospel and the inbreaking of God’s saving grace. We proclaim the power of the incarnation and how God has been working through history all along. We tell the story of faith, we “remember” and commit ourselves to living, “doing” in response to that memory. It is a thanksgiving which uses words, sights, image, and tactile expressions to invite us into a living tradition. IN what new ways are we being invited into this thanksgiving – into taking, blessing, breaking and giving?

It is an outward and visible sign – In the eucharist we physically, audibly, visually remind ourselves of the reality of God’s grace. I often think that is one of the reasons I tend to stick to the Eucharist in my Sunday schedules, I suffer from spiritual amnesia. Like those addressed in the Letter of James, I quickly forget who I am and how I am to live. The eucharist is an outward sign that calls me back home and reminds me of the sacred story. But I think that it also enables me to recognise the other signs of God’s invisible grace. Once reminded, I can look at the world in a refreshed manner and am able to discern God with us. Recognising the incarnational physical reality of the sacrament enables a wider view of sacramentality.

It is narrative, memory and solidarity. The Eucharist is what Johann Baptist Metz called a “dangerous memory” – it is the telling of the

suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a narrative that confronts our comfortable myths that powerful people are of more value, that strength wins, and that death has the last word. It reorders our world. It is that amazing combination of telling a narrative.... On this night.... Recalling a memory... Jesus took bread.... and committing to an act of solidarity in response.... Go do this. The eucharist is not just spoken, it is enacted and it is an imperative to go live your life in response. In what other ways are we able to combine these actions? What other stories do we need to hear, to remember and to act upon?

It has an ethical imperative. One of my professors and mentors would remind us that the most important part of the eucharist is the dismissal. That is the whole point. We are nourished and fed so that we can go out and live transformed lives.

It is real, experienced and mysterious. Worship does something to you, receiving the sacraments does something. It is real and experienced and yet it is beyond words and expression. It moves you and shapes you and transforms you, sometimes even against your will. It feeds you and leaves you hungry for more, hungry to return.

So if I believe all of these things about the Eucharist, then why have I not been longing to return. Well, if I am honest, while I do believe those things that is not always my experience. Sometimes I am too “in my head” to experience anything other than the anxiety of getting the liturgy done well. Often, I come to the eucharist focused on myself and my needs and what it can do for me. I have often come as a consumer and not as a worshipper.

So what does it do to you if you don't have it?

For me it has enabled/forced me to look at things differently. It has brought to mind lots of questions.

Why is that we focus so much on the Eucharist and “the Sunday event”? During the pandemic and our rush to be online, much of our focus has been on recreating the Sunday experience and recreating something similar to our eucharistic liturgies. While I know there have been live groups and bible studies, it has not been where the bulk of energy seems to be. Surely we are not only Christians on Sundays?? And worship is not limited to organised liturgies on that day? I have become more aware of the sacred around me and my call to worship always, in all that I do. It has reminded me that we are the people of God, the body of Christ, not only on days when we gather together.

It has helped me shift my focus from consuming religion/church to living my faith. It has helped me see that the community of faith is able to do all of the things that are central to the Eucharist in other ways.

I think we as a people and as a country have begun some amazingly holy actions during this time of Eucharistic fast, and I don't think that is just coincidence. We have begun to remember our stories and those who have been left out and silenced. We have begun to respond to the gospel call to break boundaries and realize what it means to sit at table with those who are outside our normative "social circle". We have seen people take to the streets and demand to be re-membered. To have their stories told and to claim their rightful place in the story of our nation.

I think I have become more aware of the varieties of ways in which God's story is lived out in our lives and have given thanks. The taking, blessing, breaking and giving so fundamental to the celebration of a eucharist, are core to many acts of thanksgiving. It is not an action limited to a prayer on Sunday but a model of how to live out faith daily.

The nightly news has reminded me of the importance of reading the signs around me and seeing and naming what God is doing in our midst. As people rise up and demand their God-given dignity I am reminded that all stories of suffering and death point us in the direction of the passion of Jesus and remind us that death does not mark the end. And even the dead call out for justice: to have their stories told and their lives honored in acts of solidarity.

If one claims to be a follower of the Crucified One then there is a need to act on that faith, not only in our liturgy but in our relations with others, and especially in our relationships with those who we think are different than we are.

God is real and present in ways I could not have asked or imagined.

I have come to see that the meal of the eucharist is not only about the "Last Supper" but about all of the times that Jesus sat with those he wasn't supposed to and ate with them and went to their houses and broke bread with them.

So I am not longing to get back to the church and celebrate Eucharist. I am longing to continue to find new ways to live Eucharistically. I am living into the most important part of the eucharist of all: Go!