

Thoughts on Holy Communion in the Midst of the Current Pandemic

The weekly eucharist is at the center of our worship life as a church, most of our congregations, and our seminary community. So the question inevitably arises what to do about celebrating the the Supper during this time when we are not able to gather in a place together. To this point, the practice I am commending to our community is that during this time of separation we observe a fast from the eucharist and use instead the Service of the Word in ELW, with its profound prayer of Thanksgiving for the Word. Like any fast, a eucharistic fast causes us to focus ourselves again on what is essential and to deepen our desire that what we forgo for a time. It will focus us on Christ present to us in the Word, and our very real communion with him and with one another in the ways we can continue to celebrate that Word: in the communal practice of scripture reading, preaching, prayer and song, and in giving thanks for baptism, where the Word has washed over each and everyone one of us; the meal simply cannot be a shared practice in current circumstances. And more, this time of fasting from the eucharist can serve as a way to deepen our hunger and thirst for the Lord's Supper, for the day when we can return to the Lord's table in all the places where we gather.

It seems to me that this way of proceeding is in line with a theology of the cross that looks to enter into the "cross" of this crisis—not to avoid it or transcend it by too easy a fix—and to be found by God there. Are we prepared to encounter the mystery of God in Christ in this moment of crisis, precisely in the enforced isolation of people from one another and the prospect of sickness and death all around?

From my perspective, the kind of virtual celebration of the eucharist that some are commending—virtual consecration and private reception—and various other forms of eucharistic celebration at a distance are not to be encouraged. These practices, which take place apart from an assembly gathered in place, tend to reinforce clericalized understandings of the sacrament as a kind of magic (with the Words of institution as magic words) and the individualism of much contemporary life. They could also cause serious long term problems of practice when we are able to gather again in person. Why not just keep doing it this way?

My own deep conviction is that the eucharist is fundamentally an action of God within a locally gathered assembly of persons present to one another—and extended to those absent by members of the assembly. A virtual communion or other ways of receiving communion at a distance may approximate this, but is not what we mean by the participation in the sacrament in the full and complete sense.

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