

Oct 3-4, 2009: Sending

Psalm 146; 1 Corinthians 11:17-26; Luke 24:33-35

Today we conclude our series about worship. We have been focusing on the fourfold order of worship and what each major part of the worship service means: gathering-word-meal, and today, sending.

A few years ago at Power in the Spirit, I attended a workshop that was introducing the new Lutheran hymnal, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. And I heard the workshop leader make a remark about one of the optional dismissal statements: “Go in peace; remember the poor.” She mentioned that the early church understood the connection between being fed by God in communion and going out to feed the poor in their community, and at the end of worship, they would take the bread & wine and food from their shared meal and take this food to the poor.

That caught my interest. That was something I wanted to know more about, so I asked her for a reference so I could read more about this. She couldn’t think of one, but suggested there may be a reference in one of the church fathers from the early centuries.

Shortly thereafter I read in Sara Miles’ book, Take This Bread, and saw that she also understood this connection. She received her first communion as an adult at St Gregory’s in San Francisco, and it changed her life, and led her to begin a weekly food ministry for the poor in her community from that same altar, the table of Jesus. (Hospitality to strangers was already at the center of the mission of St Gregory. “The church believed that because Jesus ate with sinners, breaking down the barriers between clean and unclean, offering communion to all without exception was the ‘one true sign of God.’” 82)

Sara Miles had a vision of a Table where everyone was welcome. “Our neighbors, friends and strangers, were hungry. The very least a Christian church could do, for starters, was feed them.” (108)

She sent a letter to the congregation to explain why she wanted to pursue a food pantry. There were her words in that letter: “Because of how I’ve been welcomed and fed in the Eucharist, I see starting a food pantry at church not as an act of ‘outreach’ but one of gratitude. To feed others means acknowledging our own

hunger and at the same time acknowledging the amazing abundance we're fed with by God. At St. Gregory's, we do it now on Sundays, standing in a circle with the saints dancing bright above us. I believe we can do it one more time each week—gathered around the Table under those same icons, handing plastic bags full of macaroni and peanut butter to strangers, in remembrance of him.” (116) (Being fed from the Table of Jesus, on Sundays with the bread and wine and on Fridays with macaroni and peanut butter.) Now that I came across a contemporary example, I was becoming even more interested in this connection between the Lord's Supper and feeding the poor.

And then I finally came across a reference in one of the church fathers. A second century church father, Justin, (100-165) describes how the Christians of Rome came together for worship on Sunday and he describes the worship service order. He also mentions that in the worship service, they would gather both “food and money for distribution to widows, orphans, the imprisoned, the hungry, and the wretched of every sort.” (The Sunday Assembly, 32)

You see, in the early church, the Lord's Supper was indeed a supper, a meal, (maybe something like our potluck suppers), in which the community of faith gathered together and shared not only their lives but also their provisions. “The meal was at once a practice of thanksgiving for the redemption offered in the new covenant, in the body and blood of Jesus; simultaneously, the meal was an economic practice, a practice of ‘communion’ with fellow believers, sharing their means.” (Camp, *Mere Discipleship*, 177) That is what is happening in Acts 6, when seven men are appointed to wait on tables for the daily distribution of bread to the widows. Here was the church sharing its provisions, meeting the needs in its midst.

And this is also the background of our reading from 1 Corinthians 11. Evidently there are divisions at the Lord's Table due to class distinctions between the rich and the poor. The wealthy (leisure class), who did not need the meal for sustenance, and have plenty of food at home, are arriving early and having a kind of private meal, finishing off the meal and wine before the common laborers arrive at a later time, and there is nothing left for them—and they really need the meal. The behavior of the rich people, Paul writes, shows contempt of the community and it dishonors the Lord.

When did this practice of communion being celebrated within the midst of a shared meal stop? Sometime in the history of the church, communion became separated from the feast, and was reduced to just a bite of bread and a sip of wine in the liturgy, and the connection between Holy Communion and feeding the poor was lost.

This summer while doing my research for another subject, I came across these lines from Martin Luther, which brought the issue full circle:

(“Christ has given his body for this purpose, that the one thing signified by the sacrament—the fellowship, the change wrought by love—may be put into practice. The sacrament has no blessing and significance unless love grows daily and so changes a person that he is made one with the others.” “Thus by means of this sacrament, all self-seeking love is rooted out and gives place to that which seeks the common good of all.”

“When you have partaken of this sacrament, therefore, or desire to partake of it, you must in turn share the misfortunes of the fellowship....Here your heart must go out in love and learn that this is a sacrament of love. As love and support are given you, you in turn must render love and support to Christ’s in his needy ones...”)

“In times past this sacrament was so properly used, and the people were taught to understand this fellowship so well, that they even gathered food and material goods in the church, and then...distributed among those who were in need....This has all disappeared, and now there remain only the many masses and the many who receive this sacrament without in the least understanding or practicing what it signifies....They will not help the poor, put up with sinners, care for the sorrowing, suffer with the suffering, intercede for others, defend the truth.”

(Luther, “The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body and Blood of Christ, and the Brotherhood.” in Timothy Lull, *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 255, 251, 260, 247, 250)

For Martin Luther, in the Eucharist, the union between the believer and Christ leads to a union between the believer and his or her neighbor. (Moe-Lobeda, *Healing A Broken World*, 89) The sacrament makes us one with others, and serving the poor becomes the liturgy after the liturgy, the worship after the worship. (Lindberg, *European Reformations*, 112)

Luther claims there is something missing in our practice of Holy Communion. “Luther insists that when the Eucharist was properly understood and practiced,

the people also were meeting the material needs of the poor.” (Moe-Lobeda, 117)  
Being fed by God, they left worship to feed those in need. (But sometime before the middle ages, this practice ceased.)  
And now the new hymnal tries to remind us of this link by providing this dismissal: “Go in peace; remember the poor.”

The full experience of the sacrament is that we are fed with Christ and filled with love to go out and live toward our neighbor. The meal is given to us by God to “bring us to faith and turn us in love and service toward our neighbor.” (The Sunday Assembly, 175) “We receive the body of Christ in the sacrament of Holy Communion to live as the body of Christ in the world....Through this meal, God nourishes us for mission in the world.” (ELW: Narrative Holy Communion, 7)

Which brings us to this final portion of the worship service, called Sending. Sending is something God does—God sends us from this place to live as the people of God in the world. (The Sunday Assembly, 233) Otherwise, we would call it “going.” The Sending reminds the assembly “that the church is not contained within its walls, but extends the body of Christ throughout the world.”

(Sometimes we think of the sacraments as personal gifts of grace from God to us, and they are, but they are more than that. Our baptismal calling sends us to a world in need, to live amidst the pains and struggles of our world. And the Lord’s Supper sends us out to feed the world around us. (The Sunday Assembly, 227)

We think worship is our gift to God, but we find that worship is God’s gift to us. God gifts us with a wonderful rhythm of worship: gathering and sending. The Spirit gathers the body of Christ into the presence of God; and being nurtured and formed by the gifts of God, we are sent into the world to live as God’s people. Like a reservoir, being filled so that it can also share the Living Water. Gathering, nurturing, sending, and the cycle continues....forming us as God’s people to live as God’s people in the world.