

2020 06 02 Holy Communion in a Time of Pandemic: A Discussion Paper

Back in mid-March when First Lutheran began having ZOOM services we didn't seriously consider if, or how we might celebrate Holy Communion during our online services, in part because we assumed and hoped that this "would be over by Easter" and that a few weeks without communion would be possible.

Now we are into the third month of online services, the word is out that the Anglican Church of Canada may direct its congregations not to meet in buildings until at least September, and we at First have had a request from one of our members (Lynn McDonald) to consider finding a way to celebrate communion online. Such a request must be taken seriously.

This topic has generated a lot of online debate and a number of practices have evolved. I offer for your consideration the April 1 letter from the ELCIC Conference of Bishops, which I think took a very Lutheran stance in offering congregations freedom and called for respectful discussion. They encouraged congregations to "continue the practices your community already has in place," called on us all to respect the decisions others have made, and "invite conversation to build understanding." It's hard to know exactly what "continue the practices..." means: does this refer to the practices before COVID19, like weekly or bi-monthly communion, or the practices that had evolved in the first two weeks of physical distancing? Either way, it is clearly not possible to continue what we did prior to COVID19, and given the length of the pandemic restrictions, I don't think we are bound to continue indefinitely what we did in the last two weeks of March 2020. I offer this reflection in the spirit of the "respectful discussion."

Two articles in the *Anglican Journal* took more or less opposing views. Christopher Brittain,¹ Dean of Divinity at Trinity College, (coincidentally he's married to Katja Stoessel Brittain, dear friend to First ELC) argued against virtual communion in part, because "it risks undermining the corporate nature of the Eucharist." Martha Tataric² argues in favour of online Communion because the Eucharist is "the ultimate expression of the gathered community,... 'the Body of Christ,'" and, interestingly because, "I need to celebrate the Eucharist because I am a priest and this is my vocation. It doesn't matter whether I feel I need it or not."

While all of these viewpoints add to the discussion, and I encourage you to read them in their entirety, I think there are some uniquely Lutheran perspectives on Eucharistic faith, piety, theology and practice that can be brought to bear.

1. In the few passing conversations I had at First Lutheran in late March we reminded ourselves that for Lutherans, Christ is equally, if differently present in "Word **and** Sacrament" and that for the time being we could feast on the Word and fast from the

¹ <https://www.anglicanjournal.com/the-eucharist-and-coming-out-of-lockdown-a-tract-for-these-covid-19-times/>

² <https://www.anglicanjournal.com/our-eucharistic-prayer-matters-and-not-just-for-us/>

Sacrament. End of story. Now it's June and we've been fasting from Holy Communion through our highest festivals: Easter and Pentecost.

2. Lutheran embrace of the ecumenical convergence of the 20th century led to a renewed emphasis on the importance of Holy Communion and weekly Eucharist as the liturgical norm, a major shift from the quarterly Communion celebrations until the introduction of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* in 1978. In other words, as a denomination we have spent a half-century inculcating a renewed eucharistic piety, which had some notable shifts in emphasis, but that's another discussion. Anglicans have had a liturgical norm of weekly Eucharist for much longer.
3. What do the Lutheran Confessions teach us about Holy Communion? The real presence of Christ in the sacrament radiates from a three-part constellation: the Words of Institution, the physical elements of bread and wine, and the believer's faithful trust in the words, "given and shed for you." A few quotes from Luther's Large Catechism will illustrate this:

"As we said of Baptism that it is not mere water, so we say here the sacrament is bread and wine, but not mere bread or wine, such as is served at the table. It is bread and wine *comprehended in God's Word* and connected to it."³

Or quoting Augustine, "When the Word is joined to the external element it becomes a sacrament; otherwise it remains a mere element."⁴ Further, "[i]t is true, indeed, that if you take the Word away from the elements or view them apart from the Word, you have nothing but ordinary bread and wine."

On the Word-faith connection, the question "Who is it that receives the power and benefit"? Luther replies,

"It is s/he who believes what the words say and what they give, for they are not spoken or preached to stone and wood, but to those who hear them and to whom Christ says, 'Take and eat,' etc...it cannot be received except by faith...Whoever lets these words be addressed to him [or her] and believes that they are true, has what the words declare, but s/he who does not believe has nothing,...The treasure is opened and placed at everyone's door, yes upon everyone's table, but it is also your responsibility to take it and confidently believe that it is just as the words tell you."⁵

Three further points of note: Luther argued for frequent reception, speaking of "daily administration,"⁶ that "no one should under any circumstances be coerced or

³ Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, "The Sacrament of the Altar" § 9, *The Book of Concord*, ed. & trans. Theodore G. Tappert, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959, 447. Emphasis added.

⁴ *Ibid.*, § 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, § 33-5. Inclusive language added.

⁶ *Ibid.*, § 39.

compelled, lest we institute a new slaughter of souls”⁷, and of special relevance in the time of the COVID19 pandemic, this is a sacrament of healing:

“We must never regard the sacrament as a harmful thing from which we should flee, but as a pure, wholesome, soothing medicine which aids and quickens us in both soul and body. For where the soul is healed, the body has benefited also.”⁸

Some brief observations:

First, I don’t find any reference to “where” Holy Communion should take place but rather the focus is on “when” and “how” the Sacrament is truly apprehended and received. Other than in the believer’s heart the location is immaterial, although of course Luther is doubtless imagining it taking place at the altar of a church. Nevertheless, in all matters of technology and liturgy Luther argued for agreement in essentials, and freedom in non-essentials or “adiaphora” as he called them. He was also ahead of his time and an “early adopter” by any standard, especially with regards to the novelty of the printing press, as Andrew Pettegree argues in *Brand Luther, 1517: Printing and the Making of the Reformation* (2016). As one reviewer summarized: “Luther implemented a religious revolution by drawing fully on the resources of print to *transform worship and devotion* throughout a broad swath of Northern Europe.”⁹

Why would we do it? Or what do we gain by celebrating online Holy Communion?

Given how central eucharistic faith and practice is in the life of Anglican and Lutheran Christians, and how challenging the COVID19 pandemic is on every dimension of our lives, it is reasonable to suggest that we should take advantage of this spiritual treasure as a resource for God’s people in a time of pandemic. To continue to “fast” from the eucharist might, in the long run lead to a de-valuing of the place of Holy Communion in our life of faith, and even a withering of our eucharistic piety.

Furthermore, to find an acceptable way to celebrate Holy Communion online will serve us well for the long-term future, when many of the members who are joining us for worship by Zoom now, will continue to join us from their homes because of distance or physical ability.

Most importantly we can do it, because I believe all three elements of a Lutheran understanding of Holy Communion are present in a virtual and online gathering: Word, bread and wine, and faith. Nothing else is required.

Why would we not do it? What would we lose by not celebration online Holy Communion?

⁷ Ibid., § 42.

⁸ Ibid., § 68.

⁹ John N. King, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13574175.2017.1317079?journalCode=yref20> [Italics added.]

It can be argued that Holy Communion can only happen when there is a real, physical gathering of the Body of Christ, and therefore we can't celebrate until we are around the altar again. I would argue, that even when we are physically gathered around the altar in a church or other setting, the Body of Christ is still a "virtual" reality at some level. It is a spiritual Holy Communion that transcends time and space and unites us with the saints of all every age and place.

Some might feel that their own desktops or living room coffee tables are not "holy enough" to have Communion from. Again, I think the confessional argument is that the wonder of Holy Communion is that something very ordinary becomes something holy, when combined with Word and faith. No matter how beautiful our churches or how robust our faith we are never "holy enough" or "good enough" except by God's grace and invitation, and in some ways adapting our Communion practice in a newly accessible way during this strange and almost unimaginable time is a testimony to God's grace and the consecrated imagination.

Practically speaking how would we do it?

Several practical steps would help us:

1. We should apprise the First Lutheran community that it is our intention to celebrate online Holy Communion, explaining our rationale, and asking people to prepare ahead of time by having bread and wine or grape juice (or other suitable juice available at home.) We should invite people to prepare prayerfully, mentally and spiritually for this experience so they can enter it without feeling uncomfortable or weird.
2. We should also communicate that this is a voluntary, as it would be in a regular Sunday gathering, where not everyone "comes up" for Communion.
3. We might convene a special ZOOM discussion meeting on this topic ahead of time to hear people's feelings, thoughts and answer questions about how it would work.
4. As pastor, the first duty in the Letter of Call is "to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments...in harmony with the faith and practice of the church." As such, I would preside at the many tables become one table of the online communion, using a basic eucharistic rite, including the preface, proper preface and Words of the Institution with bread and wine, either from my home office or from First Lutheran if we start broadcasting our ZOOM services from the church. After the consecration I would invite all who wish to take part to take communion, either in silence or by saying these or similar words "Body of Christ/Bread of Life" and "Blood of Christ/Cup of Blessing" as they commune at home.
5. I think this is preferable, and possibly a more satisfying and prudent option, during a time of physical distancing than taking consecrated elements to people's homes.
6. We could offer this as a pilot project for a certain number of Sundays and solicit feedback for evaluation.

In Christ,

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