



Rhythms of grace

In the ebb and flow of liturgy, God is at work, whether we hear him or not.



by
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Celebrating God's gifts

In last month's article on Holy Communion we explored how God relates to us physically, through the flesh of Jesus. This time we focus on another way that God relates to us: freely.

Every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we hear the words, 'given and shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins'. These words reflect the freedom of God, who gives from no other motive than generosity, and who forgives without strings or conditions.

Such freedom is strikingly enacted in the miracles of Jesus, where everyone has enough to eat, where basketfuls of leftovers are collected, and where fine wine flows to excess. Such largesse is displayed in the meals which Jesus shared with sinners, outcasts, and other people of no status. In the most basic act known to humans—the meal—God's hospitality is revealed. And today, in the liturgical meal of the Lord's Supper, God continues to give and forgive, and does so just as freely. In contrast to our usual pattern of life, where we earn and deserve, here we can only receive ... and then give thanks.

In fact, giving thanks is about the only thing we can do in the face of God's generosity! That's why from the earliest years, the holy meal celebrated by Christians was known as the 'eucharist', which literally means 'thanksgiving'. For the command of Jesus, to 'do this' in his remembrance, refers not only to eating and drinking, but also to thanksgiving. The body of Jesus is bread over which thanks has been

offered; the blood of Jesus is the 'cup of thanksgiving'. And why is this? Because thanksgiving, better than anything, implies a gift. To give thanks is the spontaneous response to a gift received, just like an echo bounces right off a cliff. To say 'thank you' is to say 'I did not earn this'.

It makes sense, then, that almost every communion liturgy begins with the following dialogue: 'Let us give thanks to the Lord our God: It is right to give him thanks and praise.' After that, the pastor will often continue with words something like: 'It is indeed right and salutary that we should at all times and in all places offer thanks and praise to you...' And as the seasonal prefaces show, such thanksgiving is not just limited to the gift of the sacrament, but includes all of God's gracious acts, from the beginning of time to the present meal. In some churches these 'eucharistic prayers' can unfold at considerable length; in the liturgy of the LCA we hear the following words more briefly: 'We thank you for creating all things. We thank you for calling and rescuing your chosen people. Above all we thank and praise you for keeping your promise ... and sending your Son, Jesus Christ, whose life, death and resurrection for our salvation we remember as he comes to us in this holy meal'.

'Given and shed for you ... let us give thanks'. The perfect gustatory expression of all that God is and does for us!

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