

The Font Outside our Walls

by Donald Schell

Christian faith has no in-group. It can't. Jesus offered an edgy, unconditional welcome to sinners.

St. Paul boldly announced that Jesus' death had completed God's work of human reconciliation for all humanity. It was truly finished, done, so our choices become how to live reconciled and how to share the news of reconciliation. After Jesus' death, according to St. Paul, there was no one outside, no "them" left.

As Christians we're called upon to constantly examine whatever in our faith and practice tribalizes us as an in-group or marginalizes individuals as outside of our groups. In light of Jesus' practice and St. Paul's teaching, "Christian initiation" would seem to be either ironic language or an oxymoron. What is the meaning of Baptism?

The Table

Historically, Christian communities have multiplied barriers to who may receive communion, distancing themselves from Jesus' practice and Paul's teaching. Over two millennia, adding new barriers has, for various reasons, been more typical than taking the barriers down. At different times the list of requirements or prerequisites to receiving communion have included baptism, confirmation, confession of sins, a declaration of faith, and even institutional membership in good standing in a particular community. The rationale offered for these barriers has typically been the integrity and coherence of the Christian community.

When language inviting "all baptized persons" to receive communion began to appear in the 1960s, it created a new practice that seemed more suitable for an ecumenical age. It acknowledged a single fellowship of Christians that included Protestant Christians who do not have bishops or who do not practice Confirmation. It seemed to clarify the completeness of Baptism as initiation into the community of the faithful.

This legitimate reinvention of the sacraments of Eucharist and Baptism offered new hope for actual Christian and human reconciliation. It led to various efforts to create single denominations from divided churches and to establish shared understandings and mutual recognition of ministries and sacraments among various divided Christian groups.

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Of course, some institutional barriers have remained. More significantly, as some churches (including our own Episcopal Church) began finding their way to ordaining women and began acknowledging the place of gay and lesbian people in the Christian and human community - in other words, as some Christians acknowledged God's work of taking down barriers - other barriers (such as those between Episcopalians and Roman Catholics) have been reinforced and strengthened.

God's reconciliation of humanity contradicts human (and church) division. Over the past 30 years, St. Gregory's and other Christian congregations, leaders, and scholars have continued the church's work of reinventing the Gospel sacraments. As Rick Fabian argued in "Patterning the Sacraments after Christ" (God's Friends, March 1, 1995), the dominant voice we hear in Presider and congregation gathered around the Table during the liturgy. Gospel scholarship demands that we pattern our practice of Eucharist after Jesus' sacramental meals, following his central prophetic sign, sharing sacred ritual meals with unprepared sinners. Jesus made these feasts with the unprepared his sign of the presence of the Kingdom of God and the realization of the reconciliation of all in that Kingdom. So how can we pattern our sharing of Jesus' meal on his practice?



St. Gregory's was among the very first congregations in the Episcopal Church to go beyond the familiar (and originally bold) invitation to communion, "All baptized persons are welcome to receive communion in this church." For the sake of the integrity of our sign and to remember that Jesus' community broke down barriers, we began welcoming the unbaptized to share communion. About 1980 we began formulating a new invitation to communion, saying, "Jesus welcomes everyone to his Table, so we offer communion to everyone, and to everyone by name."

Our congregation of largely unchurched people and of lapsed, disaffected Christians welcomed this practice. The open invitation supported our basic work of mission. The invitation to friend and stranger in the name of God defined a gathering that would continue reshaping and being a part of their daily lives outside of church.

In 1995, when we built the new St. Gregory's church building, we defined our architectural space around this open invitation to communion. Arguing from Jesus' practice, we did our best to remove any barriers so our building would also declare our theology and practice of Jesus' open table fellowship. The Communion Table beckons immediately to friends and strangers entering St. Gregory's Church. It stands open, undefended, and accessible to all, with no intervening baptismal font, no steps that raise it above the people, no altar rail - simply Jesus' Table greeting them without barrier.

Tartang Tulku said to Bishop Kilmer Myers, "Your religion requires you to turn me into a Christian; mine doesn't require me to turn you into anything."

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"No," said Myers, "my religion requires me to look into your eyes and see Christ."

Some would say our architecture contradicts Christian tradition. What we have built is particularly unusual for a congregation committed to renewing the liturgy. Placing the baptismal font as a noticeable barrier or entrance marker at the door is much more typical of contemporary congregations renovating old structures or building new church buildings, though such a barrier is also a break with tradition. In fact the tension between these two new approaches reminds us that we are among many congregations and faithful communities seeking ways to renew (and reinvent) the sacraments. This, we maintain, is the living witness of Christian tradition, two millennia of faithful communities reinventing the sacraments generation by generation, making their best response to their sense of the Spirit's work in the church community and to the missionary opportunity of that community's moment in history.

The font

Recently in OPEN, the Journal of Associated Parishes, a writer advocating some version of the baptismal requirement suggested that St. Gregory's (and other churches who welcome all to communion) have no theology of Baptism. In fact, St. Gregory's does have a lively practice of Baptism, and we baptize a good number of adults and children each year. In a sense, though, the criticism is true. We did not begin with a theology of baptismal initiation, but with a renewal of Jesus' practice of open invitation to the Table.

For more than twenty years we have been working to shape and refine our baptismal practice in line with our practice of Jesus' central sacrament: his universal feast with an unconditional welcome. As we have continued that practice, we have found many people seeking Baptism; our theology of Baptism emerges from our congregation's experience. We continue to find and deepen our questions and reflections on what we do in Baptism. Together we are interpreting and learning both from practice and from people's desire to be baptized. That, I would argue, is how real liturgical theology begins: with practice shaping further practice and interpretation (based on experience and fresh reflection on scripture and tradition) following practice.

The immediate welcome of the Communion Table isn't the only theological and practical declaration in our church building. Beyond the Table, out the far door of the church, literally outside the church walls, our baptismal font makes its own statement and invitation. For many of us, from our first welcome to Jesus' Table, we find ourselves drawn to follow him in his Photo of Fontbaptism, going beyond the church walls to wash away, as he did in his death, everything that separated him from any person, even the worst or most desolate. The location of the font and our following Jesus into baptism are how we affirm the one renewed humanity that church walls cannot contain.



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The font is a constantly flowing fountain made from a rough-sculpted boulder, outdoors under everyone's sky. It looks natural and appears to be older than the church. People who have been welcomed to the Table, when they are baptized, lead the whole congregation outside our church walls to the font, where we baptize them.

People who choose to be baptized at St. Gregory's remind me of Zacchaeus in Luke's Gospel, whose response to hearing Jesus' insistent invitation to eat with him was to make a change in his life and work. Change comes in us from our meeting with love. _God's graceful welcome is the source of our power and intention to make our lives new.

When the entire congregation goes outside the church to baptize, nearly everyone present (including the people we are baptizing) has been receiving communion regularly, feasting week after week at Jesus' Table. Adults we baptize have usually been receiving communion anywhere from several months to a couple of years. By the time we baptize them, they have already offered their voice and their experience alongside others in response to our shared preaching. They have already taken part in our adult classes. They have offered themselves in service in tasks ranging from helping give free groceries to the poor at our food pantry to cataloguing books we have contributed to the impoverished middle school library. They may have worked on the project to help those we once bombed in Laos to market their coffee to the world. They may have composed music or sung in the choir. They may have taught Sunday School or served on a committee, a task group, or the vestry.

In a recent conversation with our Bishop, William Swing, Rick Fabian and I were thinking together about baptism in a congregation where everyone is welcomed to communion. Naturally enough the conversation turned to interreligious dimensions of Christian baptismal practice. Like many urban congregations, a significant number of our people come to us from other religious practices. A significant number of couples in our congregation are interreligious, especially Christian and Jewish. Interreligious reconciliation and peacemaking are an urgent part of the crisis and opportunity that also demand that we rethink Baptism today.

In the optimistic days of the 1960s and 1970s, ecumenists were sharply focused on divided Christians. They were less prepared to ask whether emphasizing baptismal initiation would contribute to peace in the terrible conflicts of our times - Christian vs. Jew, Muslim vs. Christian, Buddhist vs. Hindu, _Jew vs. Muslim, Protestant Christian vs. Catholic Christian, Orthodox Christian vs. Catholic Christian - that soaked our last century in blood. The global village has only meant that tribal humanity, defined by "us and them," is at war throughout the village.

Looking for a new paradigm of peacemaking in Christian practice of baptism, Rick Fabian wondered aloud how baptism might be transformed from something "...like initiation into a club into something more like taking up a campaign, a more universal sign of human beings taking up a movement."

This interpretation of Baptism fits closely with the ancient Christian preachers who emphasized that our Baptism is in imitation of Jesus' Baptism, especially when we recall that the Gospel writers frequently offer Jesus speaking of his death as a Baptism. The Gospels, echoes of early preaching in the Book of Acts, and St. Paul in his epistles all make Jesus' violent death a sign of reconciliation with those outside the walls, outcasts, condemned criminals, the ultimate

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unwelcomed others, the most dreaded "them." If Baptism is the sign of our following Jesus outside whatever remaining barriers separate us from the whole humanity that God loves, what practices, what sort of life will follow from such embrace of oneness with all?

Of course, a Baptism that reveals God's single, recklessly redeemed humanity challenges us to continue to make the invitation larger and clearer. Just this year we have made a new, larger Communion Table for St. Gregory's. Like the old Table, it draws people close. The new table is inscribed with the Greek text for the dismissive accusation Jesus' religious adversaries threw in his face, which can be translated as "This schmuck welcomes sinners and eats with them." On the other side of the Table, in English, are the first four lines of this startling text from Isaac of Nineveh:

Do not distinguish between the worthy and the unworthy;

All must be equal in your eyes to love and serve.

Did not the Lord share the table of publicans and harlots,

Without putting the unworthy away from him?

Thus you shall confer the same benefits, the same honors

On the faithless and the murderer.

Gospel writers - and Saint Isaac, half a millennium later - invite us to follow Jesus, to imitate him and his committed practice of not holding himself apart from anyone. We hear it in one another's sharing of experience after sermons; and the example of Jesus' dying outside the walls continues to raise new, riskier, more loving visions of what we can do and be.

This year Sara Miles, who writes of her own baptism in this issue of God's Friends, said to the congregation, "I long for us to welcome the poor of San Francisco to this same Table. I want to us to offer food to hungry sisters and brothers we don't yet know, so they can be fed here where we are fed." Her vision began our weekly food pantry. The congregation made this discovery in practice as Sara was making her choice to be baptized. Both the baptism and feeding the hungry poor from the Table imitate Jesus. Both continue inviting our whole congregation to take up Jesus' universal invitation to a campaign to end tribal division and violence by following Jesus, who shared his life and death with all.

The food pantry is a sacramental story, ritual, and sacrament shaping how we live. This is where our theology of Baptism is emerging, as we find actual practices of offering ourselves, as Jesus did, in flesh and blood communion to the strangers inside and outside our walls. We follow him as we take down whatever barriers separate us from the single reconciled humanity that lives in God through Jesus' death outside the walls.

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