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The meaning of the Eucharist to us, every one

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

When the Communion plate came to my stepson, he took the body of Christ in his hands. Then his eyes got big because two pieces of the bread had stuck together.

It seemed to Chris like an undeserved treat and he wasn't sure what to do about it so he showed it to me.

I told this sweet man -- a 41-year-old special-needs adult with mental retardation and a seizure disorder -- that it was OK. He could keep it and eat it. Like a five-year-old (approximately his cognitive ability) he was happy with my answer.

Chris doesn't understand Communion but he loves it. He is, in that way, like many of us. No matter what we say about the Eucharist, we cannot exhaust its meaning, cannot pretend we have its warp and woof accurately measured.

That is, in fact, the truth about every aspect of faith, even though lots of adherents of various religions believe and act otherwise, imagining they can know exactly what holy writ means and, more, what the precise will of God is.

I don't want to romanticize Chris or suggest that people with developmental disabilities somehow are closer to God. That would be foolish.

But I do wish more people of faith had the approach to life that Chris does. He simply loves life and loves people. He may be the happiest person I've ever known, especially when, as he says, "I joke on you."

Nor do I want to suggest that those of us who are capable of thoughtful analysis should avoid trying to unpack the meaning of the Eucharist or of any other aspect of faith.

Indeed, I think we are called to do exactly that if we take our faith seriously. Several years ago, in fact, I taught a weeklong class at Ghost Ranch with a Catholic priest on how the Catholic and Protestant understandings of the Eucharist differ and how we might, nonetheless, find common ground.

My guess is that not even most Presbyterians know that, like Catholics, we Presbyterians are Real Presence people when it comes to Communion. It's just that we don't use transubstantiation as an explanation of that presence.

And yet even people who are unable to articulate a coherent theology of the sacraments can -- and, I have noticed, often do -- have a deep experience of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. Maybe more than do some people who have a fully developed canned speech on soteriology.

There's something to be said for being able to be moved by a sunset without knowing how to explain heliocentrism or to be brought to tears by a soufflé without knowing the first thing about French cooking.

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So, too, is it a gift to be filled with the presence of Christ in the Eucharist without being able to -- or even needing to -- explain it.

In my congregation we usually serve the elements of bread and wine family style, which means elders pass a plate with bread down each row, followed by a tray containing single cups.

When the tray of cups came to us that morning, I took one for me and one for Chris and placed his in the small cup holder in the pew so he wouldn't spill it while we waited until all of us drank together. He kept eyeing it there and clearly was anxious for it.

When it was time I handed it to him and he drank deeply.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you. Thank you. I love you, Bill." He patted my knee.

He got it. In response to the gifts of God for the people of God, Chris was grateful, grateful, grateful. And the bread and wine he had consumed metabolized as an expression of love.

Can't we Protestants and Catholics agree on that much and then mostly just let the professional theologians (who often write only for one another) worry about the rest?

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