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On the Loss of Communion

by Robert Buckley Farlee

I have been thinking about this topic for some time, since shortly after the COVID-19 virus developed into a pandemic and, among many other effects, shut down face-to-face worship in the United States. I was glad to have the opportunity to organize my thoughts and write about it, but in the process, the situation would never hold still. First, there was the sense that this would quickly get very bad (as it did in a few locations) and then be done for the most part. Gradually, it became clearer that this would be a long-lasting situation. As economic ramifications increased and patience decreased, states began to relax restrictions—would we be able to return to eucharistic gatherings? Then, on Memorial Day, 2020, George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police—and though seemingly unrelated to the virus, the widespread reaction of protesters against racism was undoubtedly increased by the pent-up frustration and helplessness we felt from the pandemic. And I realize that after I write this, the church’s challenges will further evolve. Nevertheless, I offer these thoughts for this time as a pastor and a cantor of the church. I won’t try to be

systematic about all the details, for such are not my qualifications, nor will I pretend to offer any new solutions to the problem. But I think it’s important to bring these losses to the foreground, so that we do not merely gloss over their significance.

O Lord, bestow on us your grace and favor,
that we follow Christ our Savior
and live together here in love and union,
nor repent this blest communion. O Lord,
have mercy!

Let not your good Spirit forsake us;
by this holy banquet remake us.
Give your church, Lord, to see
days of peace and unity. O Lord, have mercy!!

George W. Hoyer was a worship professor at Concordia Seminary; at Christ Seminary–Seminex, where I studied with him; and at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary. He was also a Scrabble fiend. Among his favorite words in both contexts was “polysemous.” It describes the quality of some words to have multiple meanings. The word “communion” in the title of this essay is polysemous. In this context, it can refer to people—the communion of saints, the worldwide yet intimate fellowship gathered around “one Lord, one faith, one birth.”² And it can

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also refer to one of the foci of such gatherings, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. We are feeling the loss of both kinds of communion. We deeply miss the people in our communion—the worshipping assembly—but also other, smaller groups, such as choirs and similar musical ensembles, Bible study groups, committees and task forces, and also larger groups, such as conferences and conventions. True, some of these have been able to continue virtually (a word whose core meaning, ironically, is “possessed of certain physical virtues”!), but for all the ingenuity of Zoom and similar platforms, it isn't the same. Yet, we expect such isolation in a pandemic, even though this is the first such experience for most people now living. We know that some diseases like this novel coronavirus are extremely contagious and deadly enough that distancing is important. What took me a bit by surprise was the depth of my despair at losing the other kind of communion—the sacrament of Holy Communion.

That sacrament, as we know, has several names, among them “Holy Communion,” “the Lord's Supper,” and “the holy eucharist.” Each name lifts up a different aspect of the meal. As a lifelong Lutheran, many times the name “Holy Communion” has been least appealing to me, probably because I grew up hearing people talk about “taking communion” in the same tone as they might mention taking a pill. Now, though, largely because of its relationship to the other kind of communion, those who would normally be lining up with me to receive Christ's body and blood, that name—Holy Communion—has become very dear.

Yet it is possible to miss, to long for, something that, in the bigger picture, is not all that important. If I always enjoyed my mother's pumpkin pie for Thanksgiving, and one year my Aunt Violet brought the pie, I might miss my mother's version, yet I would survive. In the context of the lack of

worship, we might miss the singing of hymns,³ the passing of the peace, even the coffee hour that follows. The feeling of loss over those is real and not to be dismissed. But Lutherans, with the larger church catholic, teach and confess that certain aspects of the chief service (*der Hauptgottesdienst*) belong to its core—namely, word and sacrament, the means of grace. The Augsburg Confession asserts that the Christian church is “the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.”⁴ Of those means of grace, the word of God can continue to be part of virtual worship. Baptisms have largely been deferred, and the daily return to baptism that Luther calls for in his catechisms does not need direct contact with others, though it benefits from it. In the sacrament of the table, though, we have something that has been deemed essential, and yet that has been largely unavailable to us during the pandemic.

Yet is this heart by its old foe tormented,
still evil days bring burdens hard to bear;
oh, give our frightened souls the sure salvation
for which, O Lord, you taught us to prepare.⁵

How necessary is the meal, though? Despite years of catechesis, my suspicion is that a fairly large proportion of the Lutheran churchgoing population would put it a ways down the list, below gathering as a body, greeting friends, singing together, perhaps listening to the sermon in person. Is it just a matter of personal preference, of what in the service “speaks” to each individual? In other words, does it really matter if we must forgo the Lord's Supper?

Even in more scholarly and pastoral circles, the question has been raised: can we not simply accept that since it is, in expert opinion, unwise to gather and receive Holy Communion, we can see its loss as a positive development, teaching us to hunger more for God's “forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation”⁶ It seems an odd suggestion, especially to one such as me who grew up in the time when quarterly communion was widespread. I learned to counter those who wished to continue that pattern by

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arguing that more frequent communing would not diminish its “specialness” any more than daily eating at home made that less satisfying. We may need reluctantly to accept that it is too risky to gather for communion in these times, but after having made good progress in recent years toward reclaiming weekly communion, it seems unwise to undercut these strides with encouragements toward seeing less communion as positive.

Scripture, of course, does not mention the more organized patterns of church life that would develop in later decades and centuries. Yet eating together as followers of Christ does have a prominent place in the New Testament. To begin, we have the institution narratives of Paul and the synoptic gospels. In 1 Corinthians 11:23–28, Paul lays out how Jesus declared the bread and wine to be his body and blood, and he then speaks of the practice of eating and drinking the eucharist in a way that makes obvious it was a common practice. In subsequent decades, similar narratives were included in Matthew 26, Mark 14, and Luke 22. Acts 20:7 seems to attach a weekly gathering to the memorial meal: “On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread ...” But, even less obviously, sacramental references point to the importance, in early Christian life, of eating together; these passages have often been understood as at least having eucharistic overtones. We may consider, for instance, the feeding of the five thousand in Mark 6:37 and its synoptic parallels in Matthew 14:16 and Luke 9:13, all of which include Jesus’ command, “You give them [the people] something to eat.” The related passage in John has often been understood as being explicitly sacramental, with Jesus saying, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”⁷ And there are the post-resurrection appearances in Luke

24, especially the Emmaus story of verses 13–35. All of these eucharistic references are well known; I repeat them here simply to remind us how central the communion meal is for our faith and practice, and how deep is our loss when we are forced away from it. Those who are pastors are all too aware of Jesus’ call to Peter and to us, “Feed my sheep” (John 21:17).

Beyond the mere prevalence of the meal in the New Testament is the weight placed on it both in Scripture and in church history. A sacrament has been defined as an act that is commanded by Christ, uses a material or earthly element, and through connection with the word is the bearer of God’s promise. For the Lord’s Supper, the command is clear and repeated weekly in the words of institution: “Do this in remembrance of me.”⁸ Martin Luther made much of the “for you” in the words of institution, as in “This is my body [my blood], given [shed] *for you*.” The “you” there is plural; this is Christ’s own body and blood, a precious gift of life for us, the church. And that is the core of the devastation many of us feel—that for the first time in the history of the church, a huge proportion of the faithful, those who desperately want and need that holy meal, cannot receive it.

The consequences go far beyond the personal, what each of us as individuals may miss. The meal is a gift of corporate remembering. God in Christ remembers us, constantly giving us life, ever since our baptism. And we are asked, in turn, to remember Christ and his sacrificial gift of his life for our sake. Various writers over the years have played with the word “remember,” thinking of it in terms of “re-remembering”—putting the body of Christ back together. Putting on my editorial curmudgeon hat, technically the etymology doesn’t work; the word comes from *re-* (“again”) and *memorāri* (“be mindful of”)—so, “call to mind again.” But the idea is still valuable, because as Paul reminds us, we are the body of Christ, who is our head.⁹ And every time we receive communion, we remember, and we are re-remembered—reunited with Christ, and with all the other diverse and dispersed members of Christ’s body, throughout time and space.



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But there's one additional, less theological aspect of the loss. It goes to what happens at a meal—any meal, not just a sacramental one—among friends, among one's communion of people. We gather, glad to see each other again, and to meet those who are new to the "communion." We ask and hear about health, activities, families, shared acquaintances. We exclaim over and enjoy the food and drink. And often, along the way, we talk about matters closer to the heart—the harder things of life. When the time comes to part, we express our thanks to the host and, not unlikely, we say that we have to do this again soon.

The communion liturgy is a ritualized form of such a meal with Christ as our host. Some might say it is so ritualized that it is difficult to recognize the convivial underpinnings, but they are there—not so much formalized, I would suggest, as universalized, elevated enough that they can be recognized and utilized across time and cultures. This is the feast of victory for our God, at which we sing with all the people of God: our beloved dead, saints of all ages, people of all lands and languages and customs. We have become accustomed to the privilege of reveling in that feast week in and week out—and now it has been taken from us, or at least it seems unsafe to participate in it.

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God extends an invitation
to the table of creation,
where there's wine and light and bread.
Here we gather in thanksgiving
and we offer all our living.
Here the feast of life is spread,
here the feast of life is spread.¹⁰

If, then, the sacrament of the table is that important, what are we to do? How are we, as the church, to address this pandemic's effects on gathering as a communion to share the communion meal?

Some religious communities, from the outbreak's earliest days, have defied medical and scientific counsel and continued full, participatory worship, certain that God will protect them from

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the virus.¹¹ But faith in God is not a charm able to ward off viruses that are, after all, part of creation, and such gatherings have generally become loci for the spread of the disease.

At this writing, the initial surge of cases in the United States has begun to ebb, leading authorities eager to salvage the economy to allow church gatherings with what are hoped to be appropriate safeguards. But such government guidelines rarely get into the details of religious ritual, leaving it to churches to decide whether, and how, to celebrate communion. So far, it seems that most Lutheran churches are holding off on opening their doors,

fearful of the health consequences for those who attend.

In the meantime, some who feel the loss of the Lord's Supper are trying some partial remedies, such as "virtual" communion, "spiritual" communion, and private communion.

If virtual communion continues beyond this moment in time, one hopes it will attract a more salutary name. Its most prominent champion is a Lutheran professor at St. Olaf College, Deanna Thompson, whose book on the subject, *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World*,¹² predates the pandemic. (She has at times been unable to attend corporate worship due to treatment for cancer.) In virtual communion, the congregation is dispersed, coming together virtually with the presider and other worshippers via social media. The communion elements are provided by each household and are blessed via the internet. Some, though, among them Professor Dirk Lange, have questioned whether the lack of an assembly gathered with literal bodies makes such a method inadvisable.¹³

Spiritual communion, in contrast to virtual communion, does not pretend to be an actual reception of the sacrament but is more of a ritualized desire to come close to Christ when the sacrament is not available. Its practice dates back for centuries in the Roman Catholic Church and is attested to and recommended by Thomas Aquinas and Teresa of Ávila, among many others. Teresa wrote, "When you do not receive communion and you do not attend Mass, you can make a spiritual communion, which is a most beneficial practice; by it the love of God will be greatly impressed on you."¹⁴ One Lutheran adaptation uses this prayer:

Lord Jesus, we desire earnestly to experience your love as guests at the heavenly feast you have prepared for your children on earth in the most holy Sacrament of the Altar. As we are not able on this day to be gathered at your Table, may we receive you into our hearts by faith, trusting the word of your promise, that "those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and



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make our home with them.” Strengthen our faith, increase our love and hope; and after this life grant us a place at your heavenly table, where we shall eat of the eternal manna, and drink of the river of your pleasure forevermore. Hear us for your own Name’s sake. Amen.¹⁵

Private communion is simply the celebration of Holy Communion with a very small assembly, taking literally Christ’s words in Matthew 18:20 (though taken out of context), “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” This is standard practice for many pastors in caring for members who are not strong enough to attend congregational worship. In a time like this, though, when communion is unavailable to any within many congregations (and, worth noting, when awareness of particular privilege is prominent in society), it may be asked whether private communion with a pastor and a few members or friends is a wise or compassionate practice.

So, then, if virtual communion is found by many to be theologically wanting, and private communion is pastorally inadvisable, and usual, corporate communion is a genuine risk to the well-being of participants, where does that leave us? At some point, we presume, it will be safe to resume normal eucharistic worship. Perhaps that will be when an effective vaccine is developed and widely available. Failing that, we may have to make a judgment based on when enough people have survived that likelihood of transmission is low, even if it is not zero.

Until then, we wait, and trust in God’s grace. Dirk Lange, in the article previously cited, presents several points of reassurance for us who take that course. Nevertheless, this is a time of testing, of hunger. Psalm 42 seems apt for these days:

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face
of God? ...

These things I remember, as I pour out
my soul: how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house
of God, with glad shouts and songs
of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping
festival.

(Psalm 42:1–2, 4; NRSV)

We remember; we call to mind. We remember the communion of people serving as a cloud of witnesses, the dead who, in the vision from Revelation, gather to feast around the throne, and the living who wait along with us for the earthly feast to resume. We remember that the feast is always incomplete this side of eternity; always there are those who are excluded, or who have not yet heard the invitation. Always the bridegroom is sending servants far and wide to call all to the feast, and as we wait, we would do well to join in that endeavor, so that when the feast resumes, it may be more full and joyful than ever.

Above all, we remember that God is faithful. “I will not leave you comfortless,” promises Christ (John 14:18; KJV). God still feeds us richly in word, and we still commune through prayer and praise. And the feast will be made whole again. The God who gave us this great sacrament, this marvelous feast, is “keeping it warm for us,” and at the appointed hour, will throw open the doors and welcome us, a great and hungry communion, to the banquet.

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In deepest night, in darkest days,
When harps are hung, no songs we raise,
When silence must suffice as praise,
Yet sounding in us quietly
There is the song of God.
When through the waters winds our path,
Around us pain, around us death:
Deep calls to deep, a saving breath,
And found beside us faithfully
There is the love of God.¹⁶



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Notes

1. Martin Luther, trans. composite, “O Lord, We Praise You,” st. 3 (*ELW* 499; *LSB* 617; *CW* 317).
2. Samuel J. Stone, “The Church’s One Foundation,” st. 2 (*ELW* 654; *LSB* 644; *CW* 538).
3. Though beyond the scope of this essay, the awareness that we must give up corporate singing (a revelation that came a little later in the pandemic) hit all Christians hard, but perhaps none more than Lutherans: singing goes deep into our history, into our bones. It may not be a sacrament, but singing in assembly raises our spirits to God as few other things can, and we fervently pray that we may not long be deprived of that sublime experience.
4. Augsburg Confession, Article VII, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 42.
5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, trans. Fred Pratt Green, “By Gracious Powers” (Hope Publishing, 1974), st. 2 (*ELW* 626).
6. Martin Luther, “The Sacrament of the Altar,” in *Small Catechism* (*ELW*, p. 1166; *LSB*, p. 327).
7. For an excellent summary of the church’s interpretation of John 6:52–58 through the ages, see Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 437–43.
8. The part of the eucharistic prayer in which we literally obey this command, a section that sometimes begins “Remembering, therefore . . .,” is called the anamnesis. As a confessed word nerd, I’ve always loved that term: *an-* (not) + *amnesis* (forgetting).
9. 1 Corinthians 12:12–27; cf. Ephesians 4:15.
10. Miria T. Kolling, trans. Gerhard M. Cartford, “God Extends an Invitation” (*ELW* 486).
11. Perhaps the earliest example was the Shincheonji Church in Daegu, South Korea (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51701039>), although other churches followed the example with similarly disastrous results.
12. Deanna Thompson, *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016). Thompson’s proposal related to COVID-19 is published through the Lutheran Center for Faith, Values, and Community at St. Olaf College: <https://wp.stolaf.edu/lutherancenter/2020/03/christ-is-really-present-virtually-a-proposal-for-virtual-communion/> and <https://wp.stolaf.edu/lutherancenter/2020/04/being-the-body-of-christ-in-a-time-of-pandemic-and-beyond/>.
13. Dirk G. Lange, “Digital Worship and Sacramental Life in a Time of Pandemic,” The Lutheran World Federation website, <https://www.lutheranworld.org/blog/digital-worship-and-sacramental-life-time-pandemic>.
14. Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2000), ch. 35.
15. https://www.ststephenlutheran.net/uploads/3/4/4/8/34488838/spiritual_communion.pdf. St. Stephen Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELCA), Pompano Beach, FL.
16. Susan Palo Cherwien, “In Deepest Night” (admin. Augsburg Fortress, 1995), sts. 1, 3 (*ELW* 699).