

Following Jesus Outside: Reflections on the Open Table

THOMAS E. BREIDENTHAL*

In these brief remarks I will lay out what concerns me about the growing practice of the open table. By “open table” I mean specifically the general invitation of everyone to communion, without any reference to Christian faith. Please note that I will not be expressly arguing against communion before baptism, although like most who question the general invitation, I am troubled by the disconnection it implies between eucharist and baptism. (Again, to be clear, I am a strong advocate for the Episcopal Church’s express invitation of all baptized persons to the table, regardless of denominational affiliation.) But we cannot attend to the relation of eucharist to baptism until we have addressed what I take to be the first and most urgent issue raised by the open table, namely, the connection of communion to the communicant’s self-identification as a follower of Jesus.

The most common argument in support of the open table is that it reflects the inclusivity of the reign of God. This is a strong argument, because the reign of God is indeed inclusive. “I will draw all people to myself,” says Jesus of his glorification in the Paschal Mystery. To be sure, the divine invitation comes with a threefold demand that we participate in God’s inclusive agenda: (1) We must accept God’s inclusion of people we disapprove of or despise (this also means embracing God’s preferential option for the poor); (2) There must be at least one small place left in our hearts for kindness (Matthew 25); (3) We must be willing to accept God’s invitation on the basis of grace not merit.

A problem arises, however, when we apply God’s inclusivity to the church directly. God is the center of everything, or a center that is everywhere, so there are countless domains of which God is the center,

* Thomas E. Breidenthal is Bishop of the Diocese of Southern Ohio. This essay reflects and develops some of the work first presented in the author’s DuBose Lectures delivered at Sewanee in October, 2010. The paper was presented at the Open Table Forum sponsored by the Faith in Life Commission of the Diocese of Southern Ohio at St. Patrick’s Episcopal Church, Dublin, Ohio, in October 2011.

into which we can be included or from which we can be excluded. But this is no way to be thinking about the church. Precisely because we are called to participate in God's work of inclusion, we must strive to conceive of ourselves as having no center but God and therefore possessing no domain into which people can be included (or from which they can be excluded). To the extent that we are in union with God in Christ, we possess nothing to invite others into, apart from participation in Christ. So we cannot be inclusive in the way God is inclusive.

This may seem a subtle point, but I think it has great bearing on the question of the open table, since, whether we end up agreeing or disagreeing with the practice, we cannot properly understand or evaluate it unless we understand the church's proper relation to inclusion. As I have suggested, the church cannot be inclusive in the way God is inclusive. It can, however, be inclusive in the way all human communities are inclusive. All human communities are formed on some principle of inclusion which, of course, goes hand in hand with a corresponding principle of exclusion. The church is no exception. We may want to think that we are capable of an inclusion that leaves no one out, but we are sinners, too, and therefore as incapable of inclusion without exclusion as any other group, apart from grace. In any case, only God can include without excluding. Thus, it does not make sense to imagine a future, sinless church that would be universally inclusive, since the very pretension to be universally inclusive demonstrates a sinful presumption to be like God, being the center of everything or, which comes to the same thing, having our center in ourselves.

It is a tenet of Christian faith that we were created for community that is not exclusive. Therefore, we seek salvation not in escape from community but in its redemption. We cannot see clearly what such community would look like, since we have never experienced it directly. It is hard to conceive of community that is utterly open to the stranger and still able to value the ties of familiarity that bind us to those who are close. But with Paul we see through a glass darkly, experiencing from time to time what it might mean to be a society of friends that is willing to drift aimlessly in the river of humankind, with no identity apart from devotion to Jesus, no purpose apart from making him known, and no resistance to being changed in the course of this interaction. On this basis we keep working at being a community that is not exclusive. But we do this knowing that for the most part we will continue to fall into self-centeredness and exclusion. So we

must constantly re-imagine ourselves as a community that is turning itself inside out, not trying to be inclusive, but trying to be outside all inclusion. The New Testament images of the church can help us here. As a people grafted into Israel we are in constant exodus from insiderhood. As the body of Christ we are exposed and in the world, vulnerable to persecution and available to strangers. As the household of faith we are brothers and sisters engaged in a range of moral and spiritual practices aimed at helping one another not to value insiders more highly than outsiders.

What does this say to us about baptism and eucharist? It suggests, first of all, that baptism is not about inclusion, although we tend to think of it that way. Rather, it is about our expulsion from all the false privileges (and false obligations) that accompany membership in exclusive human communities, our incorporation into the church's life of witness and exposure, and our submission to constant formation in the Spirit. This would suggest that the eucharist is also not about inclusion, but constitutes nourishment for the church on its baptismal journey. On this view, receiving holy communion implies participation in the baptismal community's journey outside.

This brings us to the question of the open table. Does an ecclesiology of the outside speak for it or against it? To some extent, it speaks for it. If the eucharist is, indeed, a table set in the wilderness, and we are all gathered around it like homeless people gathered around an open fire, then what is to distinguish us from other outsiders who may happen to gather with us? Street church provides the perfect example. No one would suggest that communion in a vacant lot should be reserved to the baptized. Rather, privileged Christians seeking to step out of their privilege partake of Christ in a setting that is not under their control, with people who are already living on the outside. Yet perhaps this is the exception that proves the rule. The impulse to take the sacrament onto the streets is an admission that as a church we are still a community of insiders. We do well to honor those who do not share the benefits of privilege. But none of us would suppose that we exit our privilege when we share Christ and a hot meal out in the open. It would be equally false to claim that we are not the hosts of invited guests. The truth of the matter is that, even when we try to join Jesus outside, we are still insiders including outsiders into our midst.

All the more reason, then, not to frame communion in our churches as an occasion for inclusion. Inviting everyone to the table

without exception looks like hospitality, but it is more likely to be the way we keep straight who is a host and who is a guest. If, in fact, we are serious as a body about trying to go outside, then it would both be more honest and more beneficial to be clear that receiving communion implies a commitment to exodus and is an aid to achieving it. This does not necessarily mean restricting communion to the baptized, although it certainly asserts the logical relation of communion to baptism as the covenanted means to remain in Christ after baptism. However, it *does* mean reminding both the baptized and the unbaptized that baptism is expulsion, and that if we want to be close to Jesus we must go to him “outside the camp,” as the Letter to the Hebrews puts it (Hebrews 13:13). The immediate concern is not so much baptism as the desire to be close to Jesus, whether it is the child’s eager readiness to “have him” at the altar rail or the adult’s resolve to pattern her life after him. The traditional invitation to communion in the *Book of Common Prayer* assumed that it was being addressed to a community of baptized persons, but it clearly also assumed that each of those persons needed constantly to re-embrace the trajectory of baptism and to approach communion with that intention in mind: “Ye who do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways: Draw near with faith.”¹ In the spirit of these old words, it would do us no harm to remember how to approach communion as something like an altar call, in each instance a renewal of our baptismal vows, or a declaration of our desire to be baptized. After all, since our food for the baptismal journey is Christ himself, communion means union with Christ—a relation to be entered into innocently by children, but advisedly by adults. I would not like to see the revival of a piety of fear or reticence around receiving the sacrament. But we should not forget Paul’s admonition: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?” (1 Corinthians 10:16). We fail to discern this at our peril (11:27–28).

With this in mind, I wonder what we think we are doing when we extend a blanket invitation to communion with no qualifier regarding a desire to draw close to Jesus, whatever the cost. I realize that we are

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 330.

supposed to be offering hospitality, radical welcome, and the opportunity to come to know Christ and his body through the very efficacy of the sacrament. I have already voiced my concern that these motives may hide another agenda, namely to preserve and grow the church as a human community that simply has its own survival in view. But let us suppose that this is not what is going on. Let us say we are a congregation striving in every way to be on the way outside, ready to take on painful loss, to understand ourselves in new ways, to risk institutional death—all in order to place God's mission first. Let us also suppose that the road we have traveled to bring us to this place has engendered in us, *as a body*, a renewed seriousness about communion as the sacrament whereby we reconnect with Jesus and recommit to him and to one another as his followers. Would we still issue an unqualified invitation to communion? I know congregations like the one I have described that do just that, and who would probably say that it is precisely this invitation that has transformed them into a missional church. I would reply that they have confused the open table with a real commitment to follow Jesus outside. It is this costly commitment that has transformed them, not an open invitation to the table, which costs no one anything. I do not want to be misunderstood here. The impulse to radical welcome is holy—it arises directly out of a community's decision to pursue exodus out of false privilege. But precisely for this reason, radical welcome cannot be lackadaisical about exodus. Its spirit welcomes all comers in the name of the One who leads us from death to life, and does so with a passion that will attract some and repel others. It is not any easy invitation to communion that draws newcomers to a truly missional congregation, but the more exacting invitation (often unexpressed in any formal way, but nevertheless palpable) to join in the exodus.

Some would say this may apply to traditional congregations, but not to so-called "fresh expressions" or emergent gatherings, where the focus is often on ministry to unchurched young adults, and where suspicion of institutional religion runs high. In this context it makes sense to downplay rules and doctrine, and to concentrate on creating a safe atmosphere in which faith can be explored, questioned, and shared in community or alone. So far I agree. Yet I do not think we can draw a straight line from this approach to a generalized invitation to the table. Here again I am not calling for strict adherence to baptism as the doorway to communion, but for strong and clear teaching about the connection between communion and discipleship. There is nothing

exclusive or coercive about drawing this link. Young adults may insist on mapping out their own path to faith, but they are also hungry for authentic faith, and, above all, to the extent that they are or become attracted to Christianity, they are hungry for Jesus. If it is clear that communion is, in fact, communion with *him*, they will make their own decision about when they are ready to take that step. All the more so, if communion has been relieved of its misleading association with inclusivity, which simply confuses the issue for everybody.

One other point needs to be made here. Whether we are talking about communion in a traditional or emergent setting, or simply out on the street, we need to remember that receiving the sacrament is only one aspect of a total eucharistic act that offers profound opportunities to explore communion with Jesus at varying levels of commitment and visibility. Hearing and reflecting on Scripture will be for some a time to question its truth and for others a moment of profound encounter with God's Word. Offering prayers for the needs of the world will encourage some to consider God's presence and role in history and in their own lives, while others hear a call to join Jesus in his work of priestly intercession. Exchanging the Peace will be an occasion for some merely to acknowledge the presence of fellow seekers, and for others to learn that they are no longer seekers but witnesses who bear Christ and his peace within them. All of these actions are intended to express the faith of the church, but one can have reservations and still participate in them with integrity. It is even all right to *seem* to take part in them. This is why we long ago stopped sending the unbaptized away before we got to the prayers, and why we are rediscovering in the liturgy a sequence of acts which can at once honor the undecided, and bring those who are ready quietly over the line to faith. But receiving communion is the one action in this sequence that signifies our willing union with Christ, and moreover does so quite publicly. We should not expect or ask anyone who has not crossed that threshold to partake of his Body and Blood.