A Brief Reflection on Kathryn Tanner's Response to "Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus"

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In my article "Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus" (*ATR* 86.2: 215-238) I raised some questions about the current fashion, in certain parishes, of unilaterally dropping the canonical and traditional reservation of eucharistic participation to the baptized. The article was intended primarily as a provocation *to* argument, because I am disturbed by the anemic theological and liturgical reflection that has accompanied this practice. I also acknowledged that the impulse behind the practice has some merit and that it might, in fact, be justified, though I have yet to see that justification. I offered a set of considerations arrayed against the practice of offering communion to the unbaptized, questions arising from the present structural relationship between baptism and the eucharist in the 1979 Prayer Book; from my experience in parish ministry; and from the standpoint of certain cultural critiques of modernity.

I considered following up with a "devil's argument" against myself in order to get the conversation moving. Kathryn Tanner kindly and ably saved me (and the reader!) from that task and I am grateful for her vigorous and thoughtful response to my concerns (*ATR* 86.3: 473-485). I am delighted that so eminent and able a theologian as Tanner has chosen to address this issue, which satisfies my basic desire to provoke argument about it and elevates my hope for the renewed relevance of theological discourse for the life of the Episcopal Church. She forces us all to think harder about this issue. Though she does not address all the questions I raised, she addresses several of the important ones. While I am not convinced by her every point, her argument is worthy of careful consideration. Some of the differences between us have to do with contrary ways of reading the same mate-

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rial. For example: in a post-Constantinian situation, oriented by a prayer book with a strong sense of baptismal discipleship, is our primary challenge one of confusion over Christian identity that undermines mission (Farwell) or the risk of ecclesial legalism and exclusivity (Tanner)? For my part, I remain concerned to honor the truth that this mystery of Christian salvation involves both God's gift *and* our response, grace *and* the moral life, and that the "both-and" of this mystery nourishes and is nourished by the shape of our liturgical life. Perhaps Tanner does as well, but we may be working out different sides of the "both-and." In what follows I offer a few reflections inspired by her article, responding to only some of her critiques and lifting up the points that seem promising for further inquiry. My hope is that others will pick up the conversation, addressing the issues as vigorously as Tanner does, so that we can properly consider this practice and choose our path forward with some integrity. The page numbers in parentheses refer to Tanner's article.

I

I attempted in my article to answer those who, inspired by the work of some members of the Jesus Seminar, advocate for the open table on the basis of the claim that Jesus could not or would not have had such a meal as that rendered in the synoptics and considered as the foundation of the eucharist, and to answer them on their own terms. My point was that their argument is not a foregone conclusion within the guild of biblical scholars and that, if one granted this, one could read the wider meal ministry of Jesus through the lens of the eucharist as a focused ritual coding of virtues which the community commits itself in baptism to live out in ministry, a ministry that includes wider meal practices with all people. I suggested that these wider practices are practical instantiations of the messianic ethics practiced in the meal by the baptized, who are strengthened by that meal for their mission to the world.

My argument presumes that one cannot and does not do everything *in* liturgy that one will do *in* the world (one cannot "visit the prisoner" during eucharist, for example, except in the case where eucharist is done *in prison*) and presumes that the link between the eucharist and Christian ethics does not necessarily require the incorporation of every Christian daily practice into the eucharistic rite or discipline. Some of these *may* be so incorporated, and we are arguing

precisely over whether radical inclusion is one of them. I do not accept that my way of arguing the connection between eucharist and ethics introduces a moral fissure between the two (p. 478). Rather, I am assuming that the link between worship and world is precisely the social body of the liturgical assembly. This is consistent with a notion as old as Augustine that, in the eucharist, the church sacramentalizes its own identity as a community broken and poured out for the world. It is also consistent with the West Syrian shape of eucharistic prayer, wherein the climax of the prayer is a strong *epiclesis* that blesses not only the gifts, but the assembly for the work they shall do in the world. But liturgy is human ritual behavior, and it is always the encoding of practices in formalized ways that ground wider practices in the world without necessarily including all of them.

That said, maybe the radical inclusion of everyone *in* the eucharistic meal is a practice of such defining significance that the dropping of any expectation of baptismal commitment is something we should consider. I remain uncertain, despite Tanner's response, that we are actually doing anything measurable with this move, and still think our emphasis might be better placed on more active engagement in public discourse and creative evangelism. But whatever merit might come from dropping the baptismal requirement, Tanner does argue an alternative way of reading the biblical data, interpreting the eucharist through the lens of the wider meal practices and recognizing that the community gathered around the eucharistic table is also composed of sinners, and those who don't entirely "get it."

On this last point, I appreciate her argument for the complexity of liturgical celebration (pp. 476-478). I myself did not claim that the eucharistic meal does not include sinners, nor that the disciples entirely "got it," nor that we entirely "get it" now, but that, in its origin, the meal was practiced with the intention of sustaining the disciples in a future beyond Jesus' impending conflict with the temple leaders—a conflict that Jesus, at least, seemed to recognize as impending. We do wax and wane as the original disciples did, fail and fall, try again, and occasionally even succeed in living the gospel that we ritualize in liturgy. Liturgy is a dynamic human activity, which contains risks and does not always succeed in animating the community members who enact it consciously to "become who they are." That said, I would prefer to argue from the standpoint of the best that the liturgical texts call out of us as we perform them, rather than from the most befuddled, muddled, uncommitted, or ritually unsuccessful moments of our liturgical

performance. With those caveats, I acknowledge that Tanner's way of connecting the wider meal ministry of Jesus with the eucharistic meal, freed from the constraints put in place by the Jesus Seminar's handling of the eucharistic tradition, provides a generous and pastoral way of thinking through the relationship between the "open" meal practices and the "focused" meal practice of the eucharist in the gospels. It deserves careful consideration. Perhaps this reading of Scripture would resonate with the development of a eucharistic ecclesiology unlinked from baptism, but this remains an ecclesiology different from that of the current prayer book. Thus, the question of our obligation to a considered change in our liturgical structure remains to be addressed. Simply dropping the babtismal requirement alone does not enact such an alternative liturgical theology.

II

It has been said that the mystery of the eucharist can only be approached theologically if one understands that it is a meal like any other meal, *and* a meal like no other meal. There are many ways to expand this observation, depending on whether one is working through the ritual-anthropological, symbolic, theological, moral, or practical dimensions of the eucharist. One of these is to say that the eucharist is both a meal that ritually enacts a world (the kingdom) *discontinuous* with the one in which we live, and at the same time a meal like breakfast with the family, by which we are strengthened regardless of our capacities and our incapacities. The second claim is consistent with Tanner's concern that the church be a community accepting of all comers to the table. With regard to the first claim, one might argue that the radical inclusion of all *is* the distinguishing character of the kingdom, so that its discontinuity with the present world (ritualized in eucharist) is precisely its challenge to exclusivity and legalism, the cardinal sin of this world. On this reading, the eucharist is primarily a meal in which we enact this radical inclusion, which would be its primary, perhaps even its only, purpose. This seems to me to be more or less the claim underlying most of Tanner's objections to the various points of my argument.

That radical inclusion is a distinguishing eschatological mark of the Christian community is surely true. Tanner argues for the incorporation of radical inclusion into our eucharistic practice to bring the meal into line with our broader proclamation and mission, claiming that I overlook late in my argument what I acknowledge early on,

namely that the refusal of hard and fast distinctions between insiders and outsiders "constitutes at least in part *what* the kingdom is" (p. 478). But it is precisely the *other* "part," to the extent that there is one, with which I remain concerned. That radical inclusion is a mark of the kingdom is a belief I share. It is indeed consistent with one of the many meanings of the eucharist that have been put forward theologically, foregrounding communion with Christ over sustenance for mission as the meaning of the meal (p. 485). That this is the *only* feature of the kingdom to which Jesus calls us does not seem to me to be entirely clear or consistent with historical Christian theology, and it was the animating concern of my original argument. I am not sure Tanner has fully answered this concern, though the seeds of an answer may well be there.

What might be required is for those who argue for open communion *either* to articulate convincingly that the cost of discipleship is equivalent to radical inclusion, without remainder (which Tanner is not claiming, though she may be implying it), *or* to develop a full argument addressing two conceptual needs with greater clarity: (a) the relationship between the *cost* of discipleship and the content of discipleship *as radical inclusion;* and (b) the relationship between discipleship as radical inclusion—a vision that arises most insistently in theological movements from the mid-twentieth century onward—and other moral virtues which one might put forward as constituents of Christian identity and which might require the support of a like-minded, or at least similarly *intentional,* community that is in but not of the world. This would attend to the soteriological significance of sanctification, and not only justification. The radical welcome of an open table seems to major in the ritual enfleshment of God's radical grace by which we are justified. If sanctification—the other side of the soteriological coin—is simply the formation into a radical welcome meant to mirror that grace, then perhaps we are through with arguing. But if there are other dimensions of commitment, or ethics, or at least intention, which we feel are critical and constitutive dimensions of Christian faith, and which are most explicitly named and encouraged through baptismal formation, then it remains legitimate to ask whether eucharist remains a meal most coherently practiced with the baptized.

III

Much of my original argument was an attempt to "give voice" to the structure and rites of the present prayer book. Tanner suggests that

I have fallen short in this regard, because my focus on conscious baptismal commitment to the kingdom is inconsistent with the fact that we communicate infants (p. 477) or that we baptize them (p. 482). She goes on to suggest that the radical acceptance by God that we ritualize in baptism—something I certainly acknowledged in my original article—is not well served by the prayer book rite itself, which places the baptismal covenant before the water bath (pp. 482-483).

I do not consider Tanner's reference to infant baptism and communion a decisive critique of my particular argument, but the detection of an ambiguity that has marked the Christian tradition from its inception. With the apparent exception of Tertullian (whose rigorism not many, certainly not I, would commend), most early commentators on baptism seemed to approve the baptism of children, as did the reformers on the whole. However, the assumption of a conscious commitment also seemed to be part of the equation, shifted somewhat awkwardly (some would say) to the sponsors instead of the candidate. This ambiguity about infant baptism is of course heightened in a prayer book that implies the theological normativity (as opposed to the empirical norm) of adult baptism. That said, our present communion of infants is precisely a function of our increased recognition of the link *between* baptism and eucharist, *not* a belief that eucharist does not assume baptismal commitment. Under no circumstances, we now say, should we deny communion to the baptized, even if they are infants, given the claim that baptism is full initiation into the eucharistic community. We (rightly) do not miss an opportunity to justify this with the reminder that the operation of grace in the eucharistic sacrament is not dependent upon the attainment of any particular level of psychosocial or cognitive development. I would not disagree, and I think that to do so would be nothing short of blasphemy. But neither do we drop the link between baptism and commitment to discipleship: infants are baptized on the warrant of their sponsors' commitment, reflective of an environmentalist school of pedagogical theory. Infant baptism thus sits uneasily, though not utterly inconsistently, with the idea of a washing for repentance and a sacrament of *metanoia*. While I know that some clergy and others who teach the faith may well have eased this tension or ambiguity by reducing the baptism of infants to a symbol of the gift of grace alone, the rite does not really support that claim—even in the earlier prayer books where the rhetorical and structural linkage between the symbol of regeneration freely offered and the commitment of the "god-

fathers and godmothers" was less sharp. The radical grace of God and the radical call for response is woven into the structure of the rite, for better or for worse.

Tanner's observation about the limitation of the prayer book rite in ritually communicating one side of that soteriological "both-and"—the radical grace of God—is a critique that I find more interesting. I agree with her observation that our present baptismal rite may be problematic at this point. In an essay published in the third volume of the *Liturgical Studies* series, J. Neil Alexander has argued for the closer linkage between the water bath and the confession of faith, which would be more faithful to the instincts visible in some early rites in which the confession of the candidate was made even as the water bath was being administered.[†] I take his theological motive to be that a closer connection between the action of which the candidate is a *recipient* (washing) and the action of which the candidate is an *agent* (confession of faith) would be a more adequate ritual expression than the present prayer book of the "both-and" mystery of Christian soteriology. As to the question before us, one could argue from Tanner's observation to a yet more radical conclusion: that the water bath should be administered first, and the covenant made immediately following the bath. This would need further reflection, more than I have space for here, and I am not recommending it. But, for the sake of argument, it would foreground the unconditional acceptance of God and frame the covenant commitment to Christ as a second moment, a response to that gift. Such a rite might then be said to be consistent with the larger table-to-font model for which Tanner argues, at least as supplementing, if not replacing, the font-to-table model (pp. 483-485). On this table-to-font model, the eucharist becomes an open meal signifying the radical inclusion of the gospel, and baptism signifies the response to which that radical welcome calls us, on the part of those who wish to make that response. The expectation of baptismal commitment for participation in the eucharist would then be dropped.

I would renew my argument that this table-to-font model would need to be coupled with a more radical revision of the eucharistic rite, including, among other things: the expansion of the eucharistic

[†] J. Neil Alexander, "Christian Initiation: Ritual Patterns and the Future Shape of Revision," in Ruth A. Meyers, ed., *A Prayer Book for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1996), 18-32.

anaphora to involve a more generous and detailed *anamnesis* of the sacrifice of Christ's life and not only of his death; a greater commitment to the arts of fine preaching; continued use of the Nicene Creed (which a few churches now seem to be dropping for fear that it is somehow "difficult" or "off-putting" to newcomers) as a summary of the faith; and a general recommitment to the arts of presiding winsomely, with grace and care. If the eucharist is to carry more of the function of proclamation itself, as a whole, then we should not limit ourselves to concern with a canon, but with the whole range of issues that ensure liturgy is neither folksy entertainment on one hand, nor perfunctory repetition on the other. Beyond the liturgy itself, the shift to a table-to-font model would have repercussions well beyond liturgical theology: many dimensions of parish life—our public rhetoric, written communications, parish education, curricular usage, and many others, obvious and not so obvious—are linked to the *mythos* of font-to-table. There is much still to be considered here. The risk remains, too, that radical welcome to discipleship simply devolves into an acceptance of all comers, without the urgency of evangelism or the call to conversion—unless the call to conversion is simply and only a call to radical welcome, which returns us to the second point above. Is that now how we understand the whole of the gospel? During the season of Advent in which this reflection is being written, I am acutely aware of the continuing importance of the moral and human dimension of "making ready" for the One who comes, and I assume this should continue to be encoded in appropriate ways in our liturgical life.