

Through faith we can come to know again the original blessing of belonging to God.

BELONGING

living in God's contentment



Geoffrey Tristram, SSJE

When a new man joins our community, the first few months can be quite bewildering for him. There are so many new things to learn, and so many new Brothers to get to know. "Where do you keep the spoons?" "What do you do on the Sabbath?" But after a while there comes this happy moment when instead of saying "you" he says "we"! He no longer feels like an outsider looking in, but has begun to put down roots and begins to feel at last that he *belongs*. And with belonging comes a deep *contentment*.

In order to thrive we all need to belong. I used to travel a lot in the Middle East and North Africa, and whenever I began chatting with a local, the first thing they would do is take out photos of their family. They expected me to do the same. They wanted to get to know me, so the first question was "show me your family." "Who do you *belong* to?" Our fundamental identity has to do with belonging.

Not to belong is a terrible thing. What must it be like to be expelled from your country, your land, your home? To be exiled, to live as refugees forced to wander from place to place, having nowhere to call home? For me, there have been few images so heartbreaking as those pictures of Ukrainian men, women, and children forced out of their homes and villages, forced away from their very country. The pain and fear visible on their faces as they seek a place of safety has, I am sure, touched all our hearts. To be exiled is a terrible thing.

This very theme of exile, of not belonging, courses through Holy Scripture. One of the most poignant images in all of Scripture is the story in Genesis of the Fall. Through their acts of pride and disobedience,

Adam and Eve have ruptured their relationship with God and no longer belong in Eden. So, God drives them out of the garden, and they become wanderers in an alien land. This story expresses a universal truth about the human condition: our shared sense of alienation and loss.

To see this, we need only look back at these past few years. As well as the loss of life we have witnessed in Ukraine, we have all known personally the confusion and loss of these years of pandemic. So many of us have lost loved ones and have ourselves been seriously ill.

There is perhaps no place where we experience alienation and loss more than in our broken relationship with our beautiful world. Years of abuse and exploitation have led to the current climate emergency. We no longer feel at home and at peace, either with each other, or with the land, or with the rest of creation. We no longer *belong* as we did. And with that comes the loss of that deep *contentment* which is the fruit of belonging.

This theme of lost contentment is beautifully expressed in the work of the 19th-century English poet A. E. Housman. I love his collection of poems entitled *A Shropshire Lad*, written in 1896, amidst the beautiful Cleve Hills which border England and Wales. My favorite poem is the fortieth one, where the sight of those distant hills evokes within the poet a deep feeling of melancholy, nostalgia, and longing for his true *homeland*:

Into my heart an air that kills
From yon far country blows;
What are those blue remembered hills,
What spires, what farms are those?
This is the land of lost content.

I think I love this poem because it reminds me of my first experience of God, when I was perhaps five years old. I would love to sit in my bedroom and stare out over the rolling hills in front of our home in Sussex. I remember how beautiful the hills were as they stretched out into the blue horizon. But I also felt a sadness, a longing. Somehow, I wanted to become one with those hills, which seemed to call out to me. It was, I believe, my first experience of God calling me home. My Welsh roots led me to discover that wonderful Welsh word, "*hiraeth*," which cannot really be adequately translated, but which perfectly expresses that deep longing for home, that feeling of nostalgia for heaven, that "land of lost content."

The Old Testament describes with searing honesty what it is like to be cut off from God and alienated from creation; to live as spiritual exiles. But bubbling up at the same time, are images of hope for restoration and reconciliation; of coming home. These beautiful images of hope are so often linked to the natural world. They are about making peace, and living in harmony with natural creation. They speak prophetically about the end of wandering and the promise of putting down roots



again – of belonging to the whole of creation. The very first Psalm tells us that we will know contentment again if we put our roots down into the law of God, "like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in due season." Micah has that beautifully irenic vision where one day, "nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid" (4:3-4).

These scriptural images of hope for restoration and reconciliation reach their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. On the cross, Jesus reconciled God with humankind and humankind with all of creation. Through faith we can come to know again the original blessing of belonging to God and recover that divine contentment which is God's desire for us. This is expressed very memorably in the words of the Episcopal Rite of Baptism, in the words spoken at the signing of the cross with oil on the newly baptized person: "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and *marked as Christ's own forever*." We who were driven out of Eden are now marked as Christ's own forever. We who were once destined to wander the earth as aliens are now welcomed *home*, to belong to God forever.

So how might we, who belong to God through faith and Baptism, receive the fullness of that contentment which is God's gift to us? In my own life of prayer, I have found inspiration and encouragement from Saint Paul. At times, Paul's prayer would express his deep desire and longing for Christ, and at other times his prayer would be more contemplative and mystical. I love his letter to the Philippians, where he speaks quite intimately about his life with God. There is a remarkable passage where he writes, "For I have learned to be content with whatever I have" (4:11-13). Paul is not speaking about happiness or joy, for which he uses different Greek words. He is using a very particular Greek word, *autarkes*,

We are content because we are living in “God’s contentment.”

and this is actually the only time this word is used in the whole of the New Testament! What does Paul mean by *autarkes*? The contentment Paul is describing by this word is essentially a profound gift which is not dependent on external circumstances. For even though he was suffering in prison, this contentment keeps welling up from within, like a spring of living water. “I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty.” Nothing can take away this profound inner contentment, this gift of Christ within. There is a deep strength and permanence expressed by the word. He writes, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” This contentment is a grace and gift from God, often experienced as something of a surprise! It is this contentment experienced by Paul which is perhaps the most wonderful gift of belonging to God. We are content because we are living in God’s contentment.

In my own prayers, I experience and try to deepen this gift of contentment in two quite different ways, which I hope you may find helpful in your own life of prayer.

Firstly, I come to God with my longing and *desire*: that yearning for God which I first felt as a child, gazing at those “blue remembered hills” in Sussex. Saint Augustine famously wrote to God, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till we find our rest in you.” This prayer of longing is how I express my love, I think. I don’t need to say fancy prayers, but simply pray the prayer of desire. I sometimes start this kind of prayer by saying aloud Psalm 63:1-8; “O God, you are my God; eagerly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you...” Or Psalm 42: “As the deer longs for the water brooks, so longs my soul for you, O God.” The Benedictine monk Sebastian Moore wrote, “Desire is not an emptiness longing to be filled. Desire is a fullness longing to be in relationship. Desire is love trying to happen.” That rings true to me. Come to God with your thirst. Bring to God your heart’s desire.

Secondly, and quite differently, I sometimes come to God not with my desire, nor with any emotion, but simply in silence and stillness. I sometimes start this kind of prayer with Psalm 62, verses 1-2: “For God alone my soul in silence waits...” Or the lovely verses of Psalm 131: “I still my soul and make it quiet like a child upon its mother’s breast.” Or I will



sit still and simply breathe deeply and rhythmically, drawing in God’s Spirit. Or I’ll stare at a candle in awe and wonder. I sit silently and enjoy sharing in God’s contentment. Perhaps you might like to read Philippians again and experience for yourself the deep contentment which pervades the letter, and ask God to make it your own.

In the *Rule* of our Society, we read that “people are hungry for good news that life is full of meaning in union with God.” To be in union with God, to belong to God, gives us our truest identity, and our deepest contentment.



identity & belonging in the

GREAT SACRAMENTS



How actually does one belong to a faith community?

Jim Woodrum, SSJE

"If I want to be a follower of Jesus, do I have to identify as a Christian?"

I was asked this question recently by a friend of mine (a member of the Millennial generation) who's been exploring the teachings of Jesus. The question startled me. It startled me because it caused me to consider two concepts that are closely related to belief and the ways God engages with humanity: identity and belonging. It never occurred to me that someone on the verge of faith might have reservations about identifying with or belonging to the large, diverse population we call "Christian." Her question led me to ponder: How actually does one belong to a faith community of so many denominations, each with its particular, nuanced take on what being a Christian means? What does it mean to belong? What does it mean to claim this identity?

The Challenge of Identity

My own questioning led me to ponder the meaning of "identity" itself. I started, as I often do, by turning to my dictionary, to see what meanings the word itself holds within it. Two definitions of this word stood out to me. The first defined identity as "the distinguishing character or personality of an individual: *individuality*." This definition instantly drew to my mind the many people I have known in my life who stood out in a particular way, either in personality, dress, or interests in peculiar genres of art, music, literature, or poetry. These people have been either refreshing – aiding my ability to look at something in a different way; or off-putting – individuals who somehow were not coherent with the reality of the world that I was familiar with. Such people often seemed dangerous, as if any association with them *could* be risky to mind, body, and spirit.

I am reminded of the classic, off-color film from 1985 by John Hughes, "The Breakfast Club." In this movie we witness the story of five teenagers from seemingly different tribes who are thrown together by the fate of Saturday detention at their high school. At the start of the movie, it seems unlikely that the complex amalgamation of angst-ridden teens would render anything positive. During the course of the day, these very

different teens are required to write an essay about who they think they are. By the end of that day, they have found a new and complex tribe, in which each identity remains distinct and yet in which, through sometimes difficult periods of sharing, a new group dynamic is also created.

This brings me to the second definition of identity that stood out to me: "sameness in all that constitutes the objective reality of a thing: *oneness*." In contrast to the individuality of the first definition, here sameness and oneness seem to draw us to the concept of tribe and the reality of being given an identity by particular markers that many others hold in common. Growing up during the span of three decades, I have had friends who identified with different sub-identities such as hippie, punk, preppy, and grunge, to name a few. What looked like the individualizing characteristic of each group seen from the outside, was no doubt what felt like it contributed oneness to the group from the inside.

So, what light could this deeper sense of the complexities of "identity" shed on the question of belonging to the Christian faith? When it comes to thinking about the multifaceted nature of Christianity, neither definition on its own feels complete. While individual expressions of the Christian faith are certainly distinct and say something about someone's expression of engagement with God, there remains a common group identity that binds us all together in one Body. This has been true from the very start. Most first-century followers of what Jesus called "The Way" identified with a practicing faith community whose adherents were also working out what it meant to belong to that particular community of faith.

We see this visibly expressed from the very beginning with the four gospels, as each is positioned as an expression of the life of Jesus' ministry shared for a specific audience, from the vantage point of a distinct

community with its own distinct identity. Matthew's gospel was written to address the Hebrews, Mark addresses Gentile converts, probably located in Rome, and Luke addresses the Greeks. John's gospel, a more theological volume, was written in Greek with strong Semitic overtones. Yet even this gospel is shaped by its overarching purpose: to offer evidence of certain signs which prove that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who leads us to eternal life.

Just as the group label "Christian" can be broken down into diverse denominations and belief structures, so too even our concept of the "gospels" as a group is shown to hold four diverse groups, each belonging to their own specific sense of identity and driven by their own expression of that identity. Each community had individual characteristics, and each gospel attempted to unify its community with a vision of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.¹ Each gospel addresses for its specific audience the questions: What does it mean to believe? How exactly does God engage with us? And, what does it mean to belong?

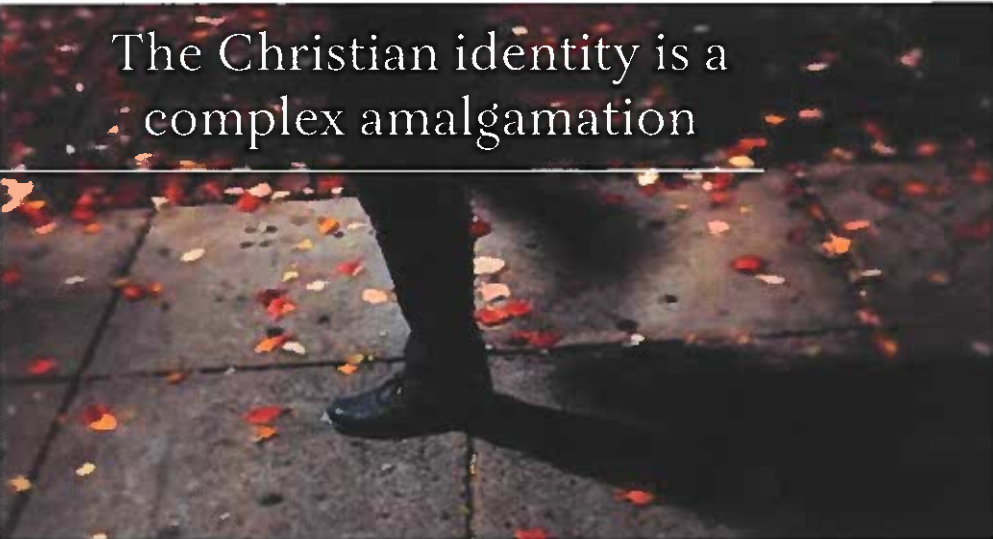
Today, all Christian denominations, regardless of their particular branding, embrace and identify with all four of the gospels, which we tend to see as a uniform whole. With our distance from the gospel worldview and its pressing concerns, we've lost touch with some of the nuances in which they addressed the specific concerns of their individual communities. Yet even today the Christian identity is a complex amalgamation of both definitions of the word identity, granting believers a sense of identity through both individual and tribal identity markers. To belong to the Christian faith is to claim a unique individual identity in the world, as well as to claim to belong to a group of like-minded others.

Identity Today

While we would like to think that the gospels clear up any Christian's identity questions, we know that, in our modern world, we still grapple with questions of identity. In fact, our questions about "identity" seem not to be solved these days, but to be splintering further. In the subcultures of our modern society, the meaning of conforming to a particular tribe is changing, particularly in the generation known as "Gen Z" (the generation born between 1997 and 2012). Never before have we seen a generation who find conformity to a particular tribe to be so incompatible with their life experience. Gen Z is revolutionizing the concept of identity by breaking down existing identity markers and embracing new, diverse identity markers as attractive and aspirational. Certainly, we see this in the rejection of gender binaries as an absolute and the embracing of non-binary identities, with Gender Queer being equally relevant to male and female binaries.

To this generation, the more identity markers you have, the more the

¹ Wayne Jackson, "Examining the Four Gospels," *Christian Courier*. Retrieved July 19, 2022, from <https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/273-examining-the-four-gospels>



The Christian identity is a
complex amalgamation

As a follower of Jesus with my own diverse and at times complicated identity, where and how do I belong in this equally diverse and complicated realm of Christianity and the Church?

uniqueness of that identity should be celebrated – as even that uniqueness is a unifying quality rather than one of alienation. Ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, gender binary or non-binary, neurotype, and being differently-abled are just a few markers that can culminate into a unique identity. In today's terms, this new way of forming a sense of identity might be referred to as intersectionality. In a recent book, *Gen Z, Explained: The Art of Living in a Digital Age*, four eminent scholars from Britain and the US set out to demystify this generation. In contrast to previous generations, who sought to identify with particular tribes, Gen Z has sought release from particularities of tribe and embraced identity as multi-faceted or *intersectional*, which the authors define as: "a term to indicate that many pieces of your identity interact to become more than the sum of each part, with tangible effects in how we are perceived and treated in society as a result of the specific interplay of those pieces."

When we bring these definitions and images back to the question of belonging to the Church, we begin to see similarities to a "Breakfast Club" model of identity, juxtaposing individuality and oneness. To be Christian is, in its own right, a complex and diverse identity, and yet it begs the further question of how we as individuals belong to and within the wider Church: As a follower of Jesus with my own diverse and at times complicated identity, where and how do I belong in this equally diverse and complicated realm of Christianity and the Church? And what does such "belonging" entail?

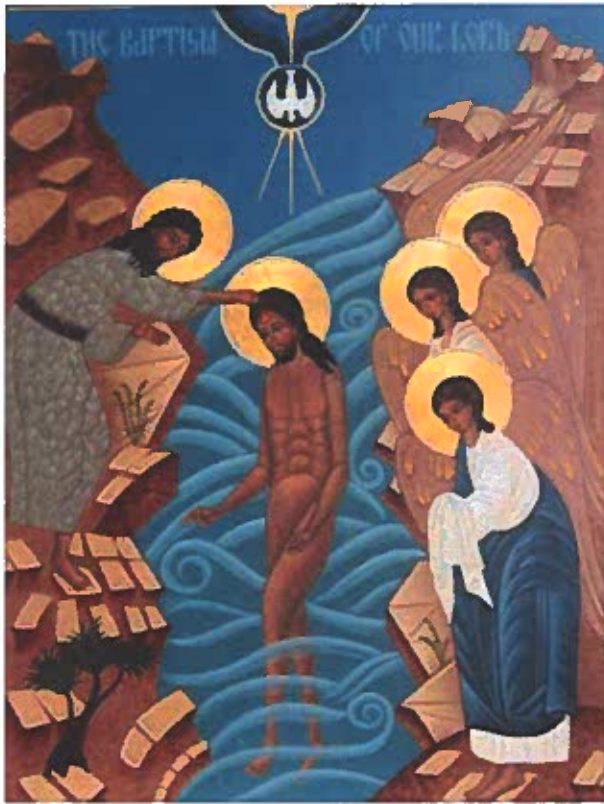
² Roberta Katz, Sarah Ogilvie, Jane Shaw, and Linda Woodhead, *Gen Z, Explained: The art of living in a digital age* (University of Chicago, 2021).

I'm going to answer these questions from my own sense of identity, from the answers offered by the group within the Christian Church to which I feel I belong. In Anglicanism (the particular form of Christianity to which the Episcopal Church adheres) we see the questions of identity and belonging addressed in what the catechism refers to as the two great sacraments of the Church: Baptism and the Holy Eucharist. Baptism is defined in the catechism as: "the sacrament by which God adopts us as his children and makes us members of Christ's Body, the Church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God"; and the Holy Eucharist as: "the sacrament commanded by Christ for the continual remembrance of his life, death, and resurrection, until his coming again." These two sacraments create our identity and enact our belonging.

The Sacrament of Baptism

My own Baptism occurred in the context of another Christian denomination, the Southern Baptist Church, to which I belonged in my childhood and teenage years. In this tradition, Baptism is seen as a symbolic act testifying to a person's mature decision to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Baptism was not seen as essential for salvation but as one way that a person declares "Jesus is Lord."





In the Episcopal Church, Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body, the Church. All people of any age (including infants who are sponsored by Godparents and supported by the local congregation) are welcome to be baptized; we believe in one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins (therefore for us it is essential), and believe that the bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble.

The synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) each record, in slightly varying degrees, the story of Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan River by his cousin John

the Baptist. While Baptism has its roots in the purification rituals of Judaism (one of three initiatory rites always performed upon proselytes), Baptism in the gospels was a rite that Jesus first took part in that foreshadowed his death and resurrection and would be the foundation of Jesus' ministry as he taught how God would bridge the chasm caused by original sin. In each account of Jesus' Baptism, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus and a voice from heaven was heard to say, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22).

Jesus' Baptism made manifest to us (and I would say also to Jesus) his identity – not only who Jesus was, but also to whom Jesus belonged. In emerging from the baptismal waters of the Jordan River, a familial relationship was officially pronounced by the one Jesus called "Father."

In the sacrament of Baptism, we follow Jesus' example. We claim our identity as his followers when we are baptized into his death and resurrection. The catechism explains this beautifully, saying that in Baptism we are adopted by God as his children and made members of Christ's body, the Church, and thereby become inheritors of the kingdom of God. In Baptism, we actively identify as God's people in the way that God identifies with us through the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

The Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist

The second of the great sacraments of the Church is the Holy Eucharist (also known as Communion, a word that shares the same root word as "community"). In the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, we come together as a community. We experience and express who we are as we listen to God's word through Scripture; participate in the prayers for ourselves, the Church, and the world; confess our sins, and then partake in a holy meal of bread and wine. This meal is not simply an act memorializing Jesus' death and resurrection, but through its consecration is the way Jesus is made present to us in flesh and blood. In the Eucharist, we participate in Christ's body – the Church – while becoming more like him by consuming that flesh and blood hidden under the forms of bread and wine.

The very first time I attended a service in an Episcopal Church was Christmas Eve of my sophomore year in high school. I had been invited by my then-girlfriend to attend the service with her and her family. I had not been looking to change to a different church tradition. To be honest, I was curious and just thought it would be neat to hear the church bells ring Christmas in at midnight. Little did I know I was about to have an experience that would change my relationship to Jesus for the rest of my life. When they came to what was called the "Liturgy of the Altar" in the bulletin, it made an indelible impression on me. Something happened that was both mysterious and palpable. When I went to college, I made the switch to the Episcopal Church and attended a parish where I learned about the "Real Presence" of Jesus in the Eucharist. Before I even knew why, I had encountered in the Eucharist a profound experience of my own belonging, which was strong enough to make the Episcopal Church my home.

Like Baptism, the institution of the Holy Eucharist by Jesus is recorded in the synoptic gospels (Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:17-20). He shares a final meal with his disciple on his last night alive, telling them as he breaks bread and shares a cup of wine, "This is my body and this is my blood, whenever you eat and drink it, do this for the remembrance of me." But this is not the only time that Jesus meaningfully shares a meal with his followers, using it to show them how they belong to him and to one another. Most of the disciples' post-resurrection encounters with Jesus occur in the context of a meal, repeating the precedent of the Eucharist set by Christ before his death. One of the most dramatic of these is recorded in the gospel of Luke when two disciples walking to Emmaus encounter a stranger to whom they convey the sad events surrounding Jesus' crucifixion. When sitting at a meal with them, the stranger breaks bread, and in that instance, the disciples recognize that it is indeed Jesus, whom until that point they had not recognized. The shared meal became the context for their gradually unfolding recognition of his identity, and theirs. So it is for each of us who experience this shared meal over our lifetime in the Church.

In this meal, we learn what it means to belong, and we commit to practicing this identity in the world beyond the church walls.

In the Holy Eucharist we identify as a community as we partake of Jesus' body and blood together, and we commit to love and serve the Lord as we go forth from our gathering, seeking to serve Jesus in the faces of all around us. In this meal, we learn what it means to belong, and we commit to practicing this identity in the world beyond the church walls.

Identity and Belonging Go Hand-in-Hand

As the concepts of identity and belonging are conjoined, so the tradition of the Church teaches us that the sacraments of Baptism and the Holy Eucharist go hand-in-hand. Baptism and Eucharist are not sacraments that are experienced in isolation, but form two parts of the whole. Baptism is the initiatory rite in which we are introduced to the community of Christ's body as a member, and the Eucharist is the rite in which we receive sustenance as a member of that body on our own pilgrimage of formation. As the human body requires food to grow and sustain us each day, so the Eucharist is meant to give us the fortitude we require to grow fully into the identity we take on in Baptism. The founder of our community, Richard Meux Benson once wrote: "As each touch of the artist adds some fresh feature to the painting, so each communion is a touch of Christ, which should develop some fresh feature of his own perfect likeness within us." And that seems right: in Baptism we are restored to the image originally given to us by our Creator, and then within this renewed mark of identity, we strive with each Eucharist meal to let God continue to refine God's perfect image in us.

These questions of how Baptism and Eucharist inform one another and shape the Christian's life in Christ are not confined to tomes of theology or the history books. In fact, they are live questions in our own moment. The Church has been grappling for the last couple of decades with the question of what is being called the "open table." Open table is the practice of welcoming all people to receive the Holy Eucharist, regardless of their baptismal status. The Church has always taught that people who have come to faith, and desire to belong to a Christian community, must undergo a period of *catechesis* (from the Greek word *katechein*, meaning to teach) – to be prepared through instruction for the initiatory rite of Baptism. In Church tradition, the Eucharist has always been reserved for those who have undergone the baptismal sacrament, which marks their full membership in the Church community. As someone with a neurodivergent condition who takes comfort in structural sequences, I resonate with such a view, which gives a natural order to the life-changing process of claiming my identity in Christ, being sustained with the divine food of Jesus' body and blood, and being supported in Christian community.

Yet, there are others who have experienced the practice of limiting Communion strictly to the baptized as an act of exclusion. It has often been posited that offering the Eucharist strictly to the baptized feels dissonant with the witness of Jesus in the gospels. The gospels are filled with instances of Jesus sharing table with different people, especially



those who were not deemed worthy because of purity codes set forth by the Temple priests. One story that is recorded in the synoptic gospels recalls a scene where Jesus is sitting at table with Levi (the tax collector) and a group of his friends. When the Pharisees and Scribes observed this, they questioned Jesus' disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answers them with compassion and directness, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance." In Matthew's telling of this story, Jesus adds, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" How can we invite people into our houses of worship, share with them the good news of Jesus' radical hospitality, and then deny them from receiving the very essence of Jesus at the altar rail?

Moving the Font to the Center

With such charged and passionate questions, definitive answers will never be arrived at with ease. In fact, throughout the history of the Church, such questions have often only created further divisions. This is tragic, since the gospel message of Jesus was one of reuniting God to God's creation and uniting us to one another. All of us are recipients of the mercy and grace of God, and Jesus gives us to one another as kin. When I experienced my first Eucharist in 1987, I do not recall a pronouncement of Baptism as requisite for receiving Communion with the rest of the congregation that Christmas Eve. And, even though I had indeed been baptized, my understanding of what that meant was radically different from those who accompanied me to the altar rail.

I often wonder whether the question about "open table" needs to be reframed, especially when the sacraments begin to become stumbling blocks in people's relationship with God. For those of us who have undergone a period of catechesis, the image of the Font at the door is familiar, as it symbolizes our passing through the waters of Baptism into a community of faith, to be strengthened by Jesus in the Eucharist. In a sense, Baptism is the sacrament from which all other sacraments proceed. But for those who are new in our midst, without the benefit of understanding the traditional sequence, a verbal or written pronouncement of exclusivity might be placing an obstacle to the possibility of someone's relationship with Jesus. Rowan Williams once wrote: "If I fail to put someone in touch with God, I face another sort of death, the death of my relation with Christ, because failing to 'win' the neighbor is to stand in the way of Christ, to block Christ's urgent will to communicate with all."³

I am attracted to the idea of moving the Font, figuratively to the center of the church, where it will invite wonder and inspire questions from those who are new in our midst. Liturgically speaking, we might do well at the

³ Rowan Williams, *Where God Happens: Discovering Christ in one another* (Boston: New Seeds, 2007).



How can we invite people into our houses of worship, share with them the good news of Jesus' radical hospitality, and then deny them from receiving the very essence of Jesus at the altar rail?

beginning of our services to explicitly invite the un-baptized into the possibility of relationship by welcoming them to explore Baptism as the means of full communion in the Church. I have often loved the inclusion of the asperges (the sprinkling of the congregation with baptismal water) as part of the Eucharistic Rite, bringing awareness of the sacrament of Baptism tactilely through the senses. Another way might be to invite all who are interested in Baptism to a brief introduction to the sacrament at the junction between the Liturgies of Word and Altar, after the Peace. This could be facilitated in the Parish Hall where coffee hour occurs, with the rest of the congregation joining following the service.

And finally, it might serve us well to consider the question: "Does Eucharist have a function on both sides of the font?" I have been a witness to many examples where the Eucharist has actually served as the pathway to Baptism. While the reverse route seems dissonant to those accustomed to the tradition of the Church, I have not heard a testimonial from those who have traveled it that this trajectory has cheapened or eroded their sense of identity and belonging or their ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ. In fact, it's quite the opposite. Those who have entered by this means say their experience of inclusion in Altar fellowship was the very reason why they were drawn to this particular community of the faithful. Being fed by Jesus at the table made them want to become a part of the family, which made the prospect of Baptism more urgent.



My own first experience of the Eucharist was akin to this. While I wasn't sure why I had such a powerful experience of Communion at the time, I was certain that I had found home. I knew I belonged before my own sense of identity came into focus. And I continue to grow into that identity, the identity of my Baptism, with each piece of bread and sip of wine, as I continue to be formed more and more into the person God has created me to be.

In the chapter of our Rule of Life entitled "Our Founders and the Grace of Tradition," it says: "Faithfulness to tradition does not mean mere perpetuation or copying of ways from the past but a creative recovery of the past as a source of inspiration and guidance in our faithfulness to God's future, the coming reign of God." As we Anglican Christians continue to discern these contemporary questions of identity and belonging, it is my prayer that we may strive to facilitate with ease those who are seeking relationship with God through Christ. I pray that our Great Sacraments may support them to know, as Christians, who they are and to whom they belong.





Formation *in practice*

We hope that in reflecting further on the topic of **belonging**, you will find it meaningful to share in discussing these questions with others.

Communities of Transformation

Who is your community of transformation: the people alongside whom you are called to grow, undergo conversion, and bear fruit?

How have you experienced the transformation that community can bring: its tensions and challenges, as well as its joys and rewards?

Are there people with whom you find yourself at odds, or who challenge your worldview? How do they offer an opportunity for you to reflect on your own responses, reframe your own patterns, and consider new ways of engaging?

How do others in your community carry the burden of areas for which you are ill-equipped? What gifts do you bring to community, which assist others to grow and thrive?

Identity & Belonging

Do you identify as a Christian? What does that identity mean to you?

When have you known the contentment of belonging to God?

What was your own journey to the Font and to the Table of God?

How do the Sacraments inform and shape your sense of identity and belonging?

What do you think about the proposal of the "Open Table": allowing people to receive the Eucharist before Baptism? Do you think the Eucharist should have a function on both sides of the Font?

"For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." – Matthew 18:20

God dwells in the center of every man, an unseen, largely unknown strength and wisdom, moving him TO BE HUMAN, TO GROW AND TO EXPAND HIS HUMANITY to the utmost of its capacity.

– Christopher Bryant, SSJE
(1905-1985)

