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Balancing the right and left brains at worship

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

A few years ago at my Presbyterian church, we tried a Sunday evening alternative worship service at which we served Holy Communion. It was a terrific idea that ultimately failed for reasons unrelated to weekly Eucharist.

But that experience reaffirmed for me my conviction that both Catholic and Protestant worship were out of balance. They still are.

Protestant worship ? at least in most denominations, including mine ? is unbalanced because we don?t offer the Eucharist at least weekly. Instead, on most Sundays we rely only on the left-brained way of preaching the gospel, by which I mean the sermon.

Catholic (and Anglican) worship is out of balance because, in my experience, it tends to devalue the sermon, relying instead primarily on the right-brained way of preaching the gospel, by which I mean the Eucharist.

If I ran the world of religion (the thought scares even me), I?d demand a better balance. I?d insist that Protestants offer the Eucharist at each worship service and that Catholics pay more attention to homiletics.

I?m guessing that most Catholics don?t know this (because probably most Presbyterians don?t know it), but when it comes to a theology of Holy Communion, we Presbyterians are ?Real Presence? people. It?s just that we don?t use Transubstantiation to explain how Christ is somehow really present in the sacrament. In fact, like the Orthodox, we don?t use any specific term at all.

Nonetheless, many of us understand what Vatican II understood: The sacrament is not just something semi-magic that a member of the clergy does as we watch but is, rather, a way for the whole community

to celebrate the presence of Christ's spirit in our midst. We gather from east and west and from north and south. And then ? in the words of the late Lutheran theologian Walter R. Bouman ? Jesus ?comes to us from the future with the power of the future.?

It's no surprise that I have been unsuccessful as a lay leader in getting my church to offer Communion weekly. Heck, even John Calvin failed to get that done in Geneva. And God knows I'm no John Calvin.

And yet I'll continue to try because I understand that people in the pews receive and absorb the gospel in different ways. I tend to hear it most clearly in left-brained ways, through sermons, Bible study and reading theology. But I also know that there are many people ? sometimes me among them ? who hear the gospel better in right-brained ways, through sacrament and music, touch and taste, contemplative prayer and works of art.

If we aren't preaching the gospel in both ways we are missing an opportunity to let the power of the gospel heal people where they are most in pain.

Just as a well-crafted sermon can unpack God's word of grace for us and move us to the counter-cultural discipleship Christ expects of us, so, too, can the Eucharist bring peace to those places in our spirits that need healing, encouragement and shalom.

And the reality that the historical trail of the Eucharist extends back 2,000 years (even further in the form of celebratory Jewish meals) connects us with all those people who, century after century, have faithfully shared Christ's body and blood with one another so as to build up that very body, the church.

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Each night before my wife and I go to sleep, we draw on a line from the Episcopal service of Compline as our final prayer of the day, one that begins, ?Guide us waking, O Lord, and guard us sleeping?? And in so doing we are in touch with centuries of people who have said those same words.

I long for a similar connection in weekly Communion, and I wish for Catholics, who already have that, the experience of excellent sermons that, as we say in one of our historic Presbyterian confessions of faith, are the very ?word of God.?

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily ?Faith Matters? blog for The Star's Web site and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust*. E-mail him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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