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Seeking an elusive 'third place' in the Eucharist

Chase Nordengren | Sep. 26, 2013 Young Voices

I don't drink. Reactions to learning this from friends or acquaintances vary, but they're ordinarily quite dramatic. I suppose I can't begrudge folks their curiosity: We have loaded the decision to opt out with a variety of high-magnitude significances, from health or temperance to addiction and solidarity. None easily apply for me.

Instead, I am concerned about what drinking means -- perhaps, rather, what it has come to mean. Alcohol has served as a marker of the significance of occasions for the breadth of human history. Often, this significance is tied closely to the idea of a "third place." Besides home and work, cultural theorists argue, humans need a hangout much like a bar: a social environment of inclusion where people go to discuss, debate and create.

Among my generation, drinking has largely failed to live up to this need. We drink on special occasions, but we also drink on no occasion at all, or at dramatically inappropriate times. Through classist social practices -- think here the explosion of wine tastings or bottle service at high-end clubs -- we reinforce, instead of mitigate, formal distinctions between ourselves as people. We scrutinize and marginalize the drinking of the addict and the underclass as we invent ever more clever concoctions and practices to get drunk ourselves.

While hard to explain without anecdote, I cannot help but conclude that drinking for my generation has become a routine, one oriented toward its own end. We drink to drink, to talk about drinking, to reminisce about drinking in the past. All the while, we lose the bar as our third place: an opportunity for friendships that cross boundaries, places for shared experience, the creator of common ground that facilitates work for the common good, a creative center to our lives.

Teetotaling is, for me at least, a reminder that these spaces are not what they claim to be and certainly not what they could be. They help keep me focused on the kind of social sustenance I require for a complete life.

What is the model of such a third place? Appropriately enough, it is, for me, the last place I still take alcohol. In the Eucharist, God calls us in to radical inclusion and to sustenance while sending us out to create into the world. Even as our churches themselves are still too segregated, their aims too variable, the Eucharist itself retains the power to be our third place.

In the first chapter of *Seasons of Celebration*, Thomas Merton argues that liturgy is the validation of a public relationship between ourselves and God, the opportunity to participate in a communal act of worship. Following the Hellenic division, Merton separates liturgy from the work of our private prayer (home life) and the communal realm of economic activity (work life). Liturgy opens not only a third place for Merton, but a third kind of communal personhood: one in which all participate in an activity characterized by freedom, enfranchisement, discourse and fellowship.

So too is the political and social evident in *A Peculiar People*, a wide-ranging book on the contemporary church by Rodney Clapp. The book is an argument for a kind of nonaggression pact with contemporary culture: recognizing that true Christians are almost inherently strange to cultural values, but attempting to maintain a countercultural disposition without being combative.

An important incubator of the countercultural church, Clapp argues, lies in Eucharist. It is not enough, he says, to "be fed" at the table; Eucharist must cause us to learn to see the world through a new sense, one that includes the grace of God. Liturgy is itself constitutive of the church as a culture: our songs and poems as well as our regular source of gathering and fellowship. Even if liturgy is not entirely the world of civil disobedience Clapp suggests, it still provides our ways of working out our "fighting[s] and failure[s]" in the world, still a means of putting the world into perspective.

That call -- liturgy as source of perspective -- means that the Eucharist must be a third place for the culture that has none. To that end, I hope my temperance is a sort of peculiar witness: not to moralizing about drunkenness, but to the hope for a different, more unifying kind of community.

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