

August 2011: The Gift of Tears

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Today is the first day of September and Fall is already upon us. I have lots to share with you all about my “doings,” lately. I also want to share a bit about the beauty of the Gospel. But I am going to let all that wait until my next NewesLetter, which I hope to send soon. However, in light of my contribution in evangelical spirituality to the volume on *Four Views of Christian Spirituality*, and in view of my recent trip to Assisi, I thought that it would be appropriate to use this NewesLetter to share with you three stories of my experiences related to participating in communion. I’m sure you will get something of the message in the stories themselves. Nevertheless, I will offer a bit of reflection after I recount my tales.

The Gift of Tears: Three Stories of Ecumenical Experience

Story One

My first story goes back to January of 2002. I was visiting Marin county, that section of rolling hills and beautiful homes just north of the Golden Gate bridge. It was Sunday and I was “on my own” so to speak. I had no obligations that would require me to attend any particular church. Earlier in the week I had seen a delightful little dome near where I was staying and discovered that it was the top of a local Orthodox church building. By peeking in the yard and reading a few signs, I learned that this was the active home of a local Orthodox community. I also learned when they had worship on Sunday.

So I found myself at 9:30am on Sunday morning standing in a smallish sanctuary with an ordinary collection of people gathered from around the area to offer praise to God. The room was pleasant: wood floors, well-built benches in the back for those who could not stand, the high dome up above. But the focal point of the sanctuary was in the front, where forty-four magnificently painted icons were displayed. This “iconostasis” portrayed, through the various portraits, the plan of salvation itself. I admired pictures of the Godhead, of Mary and the birth of Christ, of various New Testament figures, and of early saints such as St. Stephen (first century) and St. Nicholas of Myra (fourth century). Innocent and Tikhon, well-known Russian saints, and St. John of San Francisco stared at me from my right. Icons representing the great Feasts of the Christian year formed a line half-way up the wall, inviting me into the annunciation, Christmas, Easter and other occasions of celebration. And, of course, a cross. The entire front wall of this sanctuary was covered in icons. As I waited for the service to begin, my eyes wandered from picture to picture as my mind wandered from story to story, following the work of God from creation to this very locale.

And then we began to sing. *To sing!* Virtually the whole service — aside from the sermon — was sung. It was wonderful. We sang God’s praise in English, Russian, and Greek. Luckily, I knew enough about liturgy to follow basically where we were going even though I did not

always understand exactly what was being said. The sermon (in English) was what I might call “pastoral.” It reminded me of a kindly father encouraging his children about the important things of life. I remember no particular point of the message, only that I found myself gradually softening throughout the whole service. I was feeling myself as a member of this small family, which was itself part of a very large family.

Finally, it was time for the Eucharist. We sang the Creed and the Sanctus. And then the Eucharistic prayer itself. Somewhere in this process I realized that, not having been baptized in the Orthodox Church, I was not to partake of communion. Though I should have known better, I hadn’t thought about this when I entered, and my mind was elsewhere throughout the service. But now I discovered. I was *not* a part of the family. So I stood, deflated, while the congregation filed up one by one to receive the bread and wine. Everybody returned to their place and we sang the closing elements of the service.

Immediately after the service was concluded, a woman carrying a basket of bread chunks came right up to me. It seemed like she made a beeline for me. We barely exchanged names and she said something like, “Here, this is blessed bread. Please take some.” It was clear that she was, to the best of her tradition’s ability, offering me the opportunity to join with the community in the experience of the presence of Christ.

I melted. I just took that piece of bread, said thank you, and cried. After a few minutes, I left the sanctuary, shared an enjoyable pot-luck, and then went home richly blessed.

Story Two

My second story happened a few days later. But to tell you this story, I have to let you know *why* I was in Marin county. And before that I have to tell you something about my college days. I attended a Presbyterian college during what was, perhaps a more “liberal” season of that school. Having come to this college out of three years of staunchly conservative evangelical influence, I was often at odds with some of the teachings (and teachers). I also experienced my own share of disapproval from those more progressive than myself. My peers who were preparing for the ministry usually would end up at one of three schools: Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, Princeton Seminary in New Jersey, and San Francisco Theological Seminary in San Anselmo, California. The most liberal of those schools was San Francisco (SFTS). I remember swearing to a friend that I would never set foot on that campus because “it was of the devil.” After college I went to a seminary that was more conservative than any of those three.

Time went on and I ended up in Berkeley, California doing my doctorate in spirituality. My dissertation was on discernment and so I found a I specialist in this topic to direct my work: a nun who taught across the Bay in San Anselmo at SFTS. Yes, I did end up setting my foot on that campus, but I tenaciously held to my evangelical convictions. I finished my degree, left California and moved to Montrose. And while I was in Montrose another of my colleagues from the spirituality program became the director of the Diploma in the Art of Spiritual Direction Program (DASD) at SFTS.

Then in 2001 I got this phone call from my colleague. She invited me to teach the history of Christian Spirituality at the DASD. I was floored. What in the world would SFTS want with me? I'm an evangelical! I can't teach there! She patiently assured me that everything would be fine. She told me that she knew me and knew how I taught. She said I might have something to offer. Indeed, she suggested, perhaps my teaching could be of benefit both to the school and to me. And that is why I was in Marin in January of 2002. I was teaching the history of Christian spirituality at San Francisco Theological Seminary.

That class in January of 2002 was a wonderful experience. I taught them about the separation of Eastern and Western Christianity. I taught them about the Protestant reformation. I covered a lot of material in that class. And I made sure they knew I was an evangelical. Actually, I was nervous and probably made things a little *too* sure. Nevertheless, the students and faculty welcomed me. We had a wonderful time together. I found myself learning from them as much as they learned from me. I was beginning to soften.

On the Wednesday of the last week of the class, it was the tradition of this program to have a healing service in their chapel. The students had spent three intensive weeks growing in their relationship with God and in their compassion for others. Now on this evening, it was time to open up the regular evening service a bit and offer space for those who wished to come forward and receive a brief prayer of healing. The director of the program knew that I had a background in the Vineyard movement and so she invited me to stand with her as one of the couples offering prayer for those coming forward. I agreed and we came forward at the appropriate time ready to offer prayer for those who came to our little corner of the room.

I only remember one person who came forward. It was my dissertation director, the nun who taught at SFTS. She looked at us and said, "Could you please lay hands on behalf of the healing of the school here? I would like you to offer prayers for the school and perhaps you could give a special prayer as I stand here." I suspect that she, being a faculty member, knew things that were in need of God's hand. So, with her permission, my colleague and I each laid a hand lightly on her shoulder. And then it happened. As I opened my mouth to pray, I realized that I had never prayed for this school in my life. Quite the contrary, I had condemned it.

I was barely able to stumble through my first prayer for that school. Then and there I began a habit of prayer for SFTS that I have maintained on a weekly basis since. I sat down after we finished our ministry of healing in my pew. We moved into a service of communion following the healing prayer and I went forward to receive communion from my more progressive brothers and sisters. There, receiving the body and blood of Christ from these friends who had welcomed me, learned from me, and who desired that I pray for their school, I melted. I cried tears of repentance, of joy, and of love. A few days later I flew back home to Montrose, richly blessed. I taught at that same program for nine years.

Story Three

Now, fast forward to March of 2011. As you know, this past March Cheri and I were in Assisi offering teaching and spiritual direction for the folks at InnerCHANGE. The previous week we enjoyed a vacation in Rome.

Rome, for me, was a mixed experience of Roman Catholicism. Spectacular buildings ornamented with some of the finest art in Western history, much of it paid for by the indulgences that Martin Luther so forcefully opposed. Byzantine and Gregorian chant sung with such beauty and precision in massive buildings that were attended by a handful of worshipers. Kindly priests, some of whom were offering private masses on behalf of the dead. Beautiful side chapels everywhere, many of which were dedicated to the devotion to saints. I think there were more statues, paintings, chapels, candles, and such devoted to saints (including Mary) than to Christ. Furthermore, the hierarchy of the Roman Church was prominent in Rome. Burial sites, historical descriptions of places and events, and the buildings themselves were testimonies to the wealthy and the powerful. Cheri and I attended services everywhere we went, usually once or twice a day. Once again, the fact that we knew liturgy made up for the fact that we did not know Italian. We loved the services. And yet adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, use of the Rosary, rooms devoted to the immaculate conception of Mary, and the like were very common. It seemed that all those points regarding which Protestants have the most difficulty were front and center in Rome. It was rich. It was breathtaking. It was a bit frightening.

The sites in Assisi were modest in comparison to Rome. Nonetheless, I am convinced that the poor man of Assisi would have grieved to discover the expense — in money and in the unity of the Franciscan Order — that was spent on behalf of his memory. We of the InnerCHANGE community visited all the main sites and in many of them we were given brief lectures to provide the context of the site and its relevance for the history of the Franciscan Order and to InnerCHANGE as a young Order among the poor.

In fact one of my responsibilities was to provide the lecture prior to our tour of the Basilica of St. Clare. [Remember, Cheri and I named our first daughter Claire, after this very Clare of Assisi — we were pondering joining the Secular Order of Franciscans at the time she was born (1983)]. It was raining that afternoon, and I had not been able to get to the site prior to my lecture (though Cheri did and she filled me in). People listened under umbrellas as I gave a brief account of Clare's life: how she met Francis at a young age, how she left her family to follow Francis, how the womens' Order of Franciscans was formed, and ultimately how Clare died and was buried here. Then it was time to go in for the tour. One woman checked inside, then warned us: we must be quiet because they were having a service in the sanctuary.

I entered with the crowd and then saw a couple of our group making their way to the back row of the sanctuary. They were going to attend the service. Well, so was I. I sat next to them in the back. It was a nice service, typical of these sanctuaries. Beautiful organ music in a huge building. We made our way through the readings and the sermon and then it was time for Eucharist. I turned to the couple and asked "Do I partake?"

The husband of this couple responded, "Do you want my opinion?"

Now at this point it is necessary that you know two things. First, you must know something about the Roman Catholic Church. Like the Orthodox Church, the official rule is that Protestants are not fully members of the Church. Consequently, they are usually not permitted to take communion. I was well aware of this when I asked my friend about partaking. But sometimes, in some churches, they open things up a bit and Protestants are allowed to receive communion. Second, I must tell you something about this man whom I asked. He is a deacon in the Catholic Church. He had recently been at school in Rome in the Angelicum, doing studies under the direction of the church in the relationship of the Catholic Church with other groups (ecumenical studies). He was about to leave Assisi to make a number of visits to important people, networking Roman officials with new monastic expressions. When I asked the question, "Do I partake?" I knew who I was asking. And when he responded, "Do you want my opinion?" he knew what he was saying.

"Yes, I replied."

He calmly said something like, "If you feel the Holy Spirit moving you to the Lord's Table, then listen, and follow. It is the Lord who welcomes you."

Once again an outsider brought in, I took advantage of the situation. I got in line and gradually worked my way up to the front to receive communion. And as I stood in line I realized. Here I was, for nearly thirty years the father of Claire Howard, in Assisi at the Basilica of St. Clare, right above her grave, receiving the body of Christ. So I came, bringing Claire to Clare and receiving from the Basilica of Clare on behalf of my Claire in San Francisco.

And once again, something happened. Somehow all the medieval history and Clare and Francis and my Claire and San Francisco and my outsider/insider status in the Catholic Church and InnerCHANGE: A Missionary Order among the Poor all were merged together in the love of Christ. I melted. I offered my Claire and I received grace for her from the heritage of Clare. I returned to my back pew in tears. God had met me in a special way and I knew that he would meet Claire as well. After a few minutes we said the closing parts of the service and I went on with my tour, richly blessed.

Reflections

Somewhere on my way back from Italy I realized that thrice I had received a gift of tears in association with receiving communion: once in an Orthodox service, once in a progressive mainline Protestant service (by the way, many of those whom conservatives label as "liberal" feel more comfortable with the term "progressive" these days), and once in a Roman Catholic service. And here I am, about to publish my reflections on "evangelical spirituality" complete with responses to Roman Catholic, progressive mainline Protestant, and Orthodox writers. Indeed, as I write this NewsLetter, I am expecting the essays of the other three writers at any minute. God has granted me special graces in the context of the very three traditions to which I am responding in this collection of essays.

As you have learned in my previous NewsLetters, I am comfortable with calling myself an "evangelical" (though there are probably occasions where it is not the best term to use). I think

that the evangelical tradition has much to contribute to the body of Christ. But – and here is my point – *the evangelical tradition is not the body of Christ* . The body of Christ is much larger than any single tradition. In fact I will go one step further. *The evangelical tradition is not the authoritative voice of the body of Christ*.

In *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, I discuss the subject of authority and diversity in the chapter on Care. I reintroduce different elements of knowing that we have explored in the previous chapters (being aware, experiencing, understanding, and so on) and argue that none of these offers the authoritative voice in human knowledge. Each element offers a necessary and fallible contribution to the whole of human knowing. Consequently, knowledge best develops when each element makes its contribution in a spirit of humble relationship with all the other elements. And then I apply this insight to the authority of the Christian church. “Where is the authority of the church?” I ask. “Is this authority to be found in the Contemplatives, or the Charismatics, or the Evangelicals, or the Social Gospellers? No, the wisdom of God is to be found in the combined gifts of the *whole* church insofar as each part is clearly and honestly surrendering and sharing and giving to each other” (p. 354). The authoritative voice of the body of Christ is the body of Christ itself, in all its diversity, speaking to each other and through one another to the world. If we are speaking well and clearly, our authority is stronger. If we are marred by factions and strife and those others sins Paul mentions, our authority is weakened.

Over the years, I have tried not merely to study the breadth of the riches of the Christian community, but to receive from that breadth. By God’s grace, I have received wonderful things from many traditions. I encourage you to do likewise.