

Gifts of the table

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [December 11, 2013](#) issue



My congregation, St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, opens its doors to members, to invitees and to those who are served by various outreach ministries. Our number of ministries is all the more remarkable because we are a relatively small parish, with about 150 worshipers on a typical Sunday. We open our doors to Alcoholics Anonymous, to the homeless for meals and overnight stays, to a monthly Taizé gathering, and to many other people and groups. The theme of our stewardship campaign this year is “Open Doors.”

There is another door we open, or rather that is open to us, and I believe that this open door accounts for the church’s energy and generosity. The door I refer to is the Eucharist. The theologian John Zizioulas has said that the Eucharist makes the church. (He has also said the obverse is true, that the church, as a graced body and itself a tradition-bearing vehicle, makes the Eucharist—but that would be the theme of another column.) That the Eucharist makes the church is true for our congregation. How is this so?

I view our church—and any church—as first of all a worshipping community centered on the Eucharist. The Eucharist, the Great Thanksgiving, gives us gifts that grant us our life and enables our service, our mission, as a church. The Eucharist gives us innumerable gifts, but we may think of its power especially in terms of three gifts.

The first gift of the Eucharist is the gift of life in Christ. In the Eucharist the resurrected Christ is really present. We need not be detained by intricate theories of how Christ's real presence is in our midst at the Eucharist. First and finally, it is important—as the country singer Iris Dement has put it—to “let the mystery be.” And the mystery is that in Eucharist we partake of the body and blood of Christ. The body and blood are the very life of Christ, and they grant us life. We are made whole by the broken body of the Lord. The Eucharist also assures us that Christ has conquered death and so gives us the courage to face our own deaths. Encompassing life and death, the life of Christ given us in the Eucharist is the basis of all our being and of all our own giving.

The second gift of the Eucharist is the gift of ourselves. At the beginning of the Eucharist, the elements of bread and wine, as well as our monetary offerings, are carried to the altar. Bread and wine are the result of human planting, cultivation and harvesting—in other words, they are the result of work. They represent all human work. The Eucharist sanctifies our work and gives us ourselves in all the variety of our endeavors, as students, professors, businesspersons, teachers, publishers and therapists. The Eucharist encompasses and enlivens all these lines of work. It gives us ourselves in Christ. And out of selves so generously given, we in turn may give generously.

The third gift of the Eucharist is the gift of one another. By partaking of the body of Christ, we become the body of Christ. Our circular altar rail allows us to surround the altar and to see one another as we partake of the bread and the wine. We see one another in all our variety, of sexes and races and ages. And we are gathered around the altar to become one. There is more: we become one with others outside our community who also partake of the Eucharist. And so in the Eucharist we are one with Christians around the country and around the world—not least, for St. Barnabas members, with brothers and sisters in our companion diocese of Renk, in the Sudan.

Over the altar at St. Barnabas towers a large white dome. The dome reminds us that when we come to the Eucharist we are joined by the host of heaven, who are praying and celebrating with us. Knitted together with one another, with Christians around the world and with the host of heaven, we are enabled to become not only giving individuals, but a giving community.

To scratch the meanings of the Eucharist, then, points to how much we have to be thankful for. We give because God has first given. “Of thine own we have given thee,” we sometimes pray during the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the door to

life—and the key that opens our doors so widely and generously.