

Thanks for what?

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [January 8, 2014](#) issue



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“I thought we might . . .” I am sitting in my friend’s bedroom. He’s struggling to say something but I’m not sure what he has in mind so I smile to encourage him. Eventually he says, “Maybe we could do some bread and wine. Eucharist.”

I hadn’t seen my friend for two years. It breaks my heart to see him like this.

Once he was a renaissance man. He played jazz: we used to go out for a drink and he’d sidle up to the band and offer his services at the piano and take the saxophonist to the cleaners. He taught public school: he challenged at-risk youth to write poems, to believe in themselves and share the glory of literature. He climbed mountains, he painted, he played guitar, he baked. He even knitted. His piercing, intense brown eyes listened to you as if you were the only one in the world. He was handsome, tall, charming: if he ever asked a beautiful woman up to see his etchings, she’d have been a fool not to go.

But ten years ago post-viral fatigue snared him and never abated; he had to sign off on work. He was restricted to a small circumference around the home, then had to rent out half his house to survive financially. The walls of his life started to retract inward, like a melodramatic movie. While my life went from England to the United States and back, his life stood still.

I tried to see him at least once a year. There would always be a way I could detour from a speaking engagement or family road trip. I aspired to be the only person in his life who wasn't constantly sending him links to websites with practical help or miraculous cures. But my time became more circumscribed, and his health more unpredictable. So this time it had been two years.

This time together was gentle and tender. Old conversations about traversing edgy mountain passes or attempting overly ambitious recipes came flooding back. His eyes still glint; his chuckle still invites a smile. And then Eucharist. He does faith the way he does everything else: he makes it so much more interesting than other people do. Trouble was, when I went down to the kitchen there was no wine. So it was a crust and Cinzano celebration.

And suddenly every word mattered. "The Lord be with you." Who else had stayed with him these ten wilderness years? "We are sorry . . ." What had he done to deserve this? How to confess when someone is evidently more sinned against than sinning?

It got harder. It was time for intercession. He wasn't helping me: I was the priest. I had to lead it all myself. Intercession is the time you stand face to face with God and say, "Well, how about it? Show us what you got." And God says, "Tell me what you want." Well, since you ask, what I want is to sink to my knees and beat the floorboards and say, "How long, O Lord? How can you keep this beloved man in prison? Can't you see he's like Job? He's somehow keeping going, keeping sane, keeping steady when I'd have gone to pieces long ago." I want to pummel my fists into the heart of God and say, "Stop, stop this, you've made whatever point you wanted to make, I understand death, even sudden death, but why evacuate life of all its breath, why eviscerate a vibrant life like this?"

But I don't. I say, "Faithful God, you have given friends: never let us be alone. Beckoning God, you have given us a story: make our future bigger than our past. Embracing God, you have given us yourself: suffuse our lives with love beyond our imagining." And then, having asked God to lift our hearts, I hold the bread and wine and say, "Heartbreaking God, in Christ you have had your body broken; make this broken body a blessing to your people, this wasted lifeblood a gift to your world." And we relive the Last Supper and anticipate the great banquet with vermouth and victuals.

But the hardest prayer is still to come: thanksgiving after communion. Here I fall silent. Thanks for what, exactly? Thanksgiving is the flip side of intercession: God has answered the question, “What you got?”—and we work out if it’s too little—or too much. And I discover that the one who can find the grace to give thanks has been given the power to survive the worst that life can send. In the silence I am a priest in the dark searching for words. “God of every breath, thank you for stillness, that we can hear you breathe. Thank you for touch, that we can share with one another like this and know you are with us. Thank you for words, that we can know you speak.”

Here, here in the presence of this broken body, in the company of this broken heart, I meet the risen Lord. I rediscover what it means to be a priest.