

Sunday, May 11, 2014: Acts 2:42-47

## **Luke's report of the church's economic sharing interrupts our reading of what might otherwise be an easy passage.**

by [Yvette Schock](#) in the [April 30, 2014](#) issue

For you. Of all the things I've learned in seminary and in ministry, the power of these two words is among the most important. Luther emphasizes this in his Small Catechism, where he insists that there is nothing people can do to make themselves worthy of communion:

Fasting and bodily preparation are certainly fine outward training. But that person is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." But anyone who does not believe these words or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared, for the words "for you" require all hearts to believe.

Those words "for you" carry the weight of this impossible, unbelievable mystery: that the Creator of all that is, seen and unseen, gives a whit about every single person who approaches the table. It's the mystery of the infinite, unknowable, whole, and holy one who yearns for us—and reaches out to us through bread and wine to make us whole, too. Those two words make a claim on each person who receives; they call each of us to trust that God has acted in Christ *for us*.

I may have encountered this passage from Luther in confirmation class. I certainly heard those words every Sunday as I held out my cupped hands: "Body of Christ, given for you." But I was 14 years old, and while I may have worried about not having the right kind of jeans and whether or not Jason Q. would ask me to dance, I did not worry about being worthy to receive communion. I had never been made to feel unworthy, at the communion rail or anywhere else. I knew my family loved me, and I felt loved at church, too.

For my seminary field education I was assigned to a small, vibrant congregation in San Francisco, St. Francis Lutheran Church. It was there that I began to grasp the power and importance of the words “for you.”

St. Francis has long been marked by its welcome to all people and by the conviction that “gay people are as much a part of the body of Christ as anyone.” Many members have experienced rejection and injury at other churches, at school, sometimes in their family homes. They have been made to feel unworthy. As I came to know the people of St. Francis, I felt a sense of urgency during the distribution of communion. Each time I held out a ragged piece of bread or lifted the chalice, I began to speak those words more deliberately and firmly: “This is the body of Christ, given for you.”

Communion is one of the essential early church practices that Luke describes in Acts 2. After the whirling, chattering outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost, the disciples and 3,000 new believers grew into a community marked by study, prayer, radical economic sharing, regular worship, and the breaking of bread—which I understand to mean both the sacrament and ordinary meals.

Luke’s snapshot is at once familiar and strange. Study, prayer, worship, communion, and potlucks—pick up any church newsletter and you’ll see reports of all these practices. The obvious outlier is outlined in verses 44–45: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.”

These two verses seem to electrify readers—some find the practice inspiring; others see it as utopian foolishness. If we believe this is in any way a model for how to respond today to the promptings of the Holy Spirit—how to live as the body of Christ—this passage should make most of us uncomfortable. It describes a practice of sharing that is far more sacrificial than even our most generous pledges, one that demands a profound reordering of our relationship to our stuff and our neighbors.

Luke’s report of the church’s economic sharing interrupts our reading of what might otherwise be an easy passage. Perhaps it might also help us recognize the challenge of those practices that seem so familiar. Communion also makes uncomfortable demands on us, invites and tugs us into new relationships. Luther wrote of communion as a sacrament of love wherein we are joined to Christ and to our neighbors; their burdens, sorrows, and hopes become ours.

When we step forward to receive the bread and wine, we hear those two powerful words: “for you.” They carry to us God’s promises for redemption, forgiveness, and abundant life. Then we move along, and the person behind us steps forward—and we hear those words again. All at once we are reminded that God’s promises are for each of us and yet not for any one of us alone. It’s not an individual affirmation but an invitation to sit down at a table with all the other broken, hungry sinners. And as we sit at that table, we might just find ourselves a little bit less attached to some of our stuff and a little more open to sharing with our neighbor.