

Discerning the body

By [Patrick J. Willson](#)

August 23, 2010

“When you give a banquet,” Jesus said, “invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind,” but he didn’t say anything about atheists. Jesus apparently did not run into many atheists, but we certainly do. What happens when an atheist is among those who “come from east and west, from north and south,” to “eat in the kingdom of God” (Luke 13:29)?

Improbable though it may sound, Texas Presbyterians have been dealing with this very problem. A self-professed atheist joined St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in Austin. Christ and his community this man found utterly appealing; the logic of theism, less so. The oddness of this affiliation generated publicity, and other Presbyterians protested. Evidently enthusiasm for evangelism has its limits.

Christ’s calling disrupts the church’s desire to get everything in order. According to the Westminster Confession this calling operates by “God’s free and special grace alone” and “not from anything at all foreseen” in us. All qualifications are disqualified. Christ calls, “Friend, come up higher,” and hearing that call is sufficient.

For some years my own congregation has welcomed members who are unable to make a profession of faith. Once upon a time they could, but now they come in the care of their spouses or children. Alzheimer’s and other damnable dementias do their work of erasing memory and personality, but the church remembers its calling and tries to preserve its character as a place of Christ’s hospitality. We break the bread and share the cup of his feast. What this action may mean in the clouded consciousness of these women and men we cannot know, but we can recognize the unmistakable grace of Christ’s invitation.

The contours of this banquet welcoming “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” are extravagantly described in the July-December 2009 special issue of the [Journal of Religion, Disability & Health](#), edited by William C. Gaventa. This mixture of thoughtful articles and occasional anecdotes is a treasure trove for pastors and

churches wishing to explore the extravagance of Christ's generosity.

In one astonishing piece Richard Sparrow remembers a worship service in which a somber-looking, three-piece-suited deacon serving communion noticed a woman in her wheelchair with her companion guide dog. Sizing up the situation theologically, the deacon served the woman and then bent down to give a piece of bread to the dog.

Many years ago Charles M. Nielsen wrote a parody about [serving communion to dogs](#) called "[Abendmahl für Hunde](#)." But in this case it could be argued that the deacon was going about "discerning the body" (1 Cor. 11:29) and recognized that this dog was not merely a pet but an irreplaceable part of the body. The one presiding in the liturgy is supposed to "bound the table," but Jesus' invitation leaps the bounds of our imagination.

Additional lectionary columns by Willson appear in the August 24 issue of the Century—click [here](#) to subscribe.