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Taste and See That the Lord Is Good

Stephen Larson¹

In the *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther abundantly described “daily bread” in his explanation of the Lord’s Prayer:

Everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, farm fields, livestock, money, property, an upright spouse, upright children, upright members of the household, upright and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, decency, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.²

Following Luther’s lead, one might similarly describe baptism and holy communion as gifts of God that extravagantly bestow upon the people of God grace, forgiveness, mercy, healing, and peace in a multitude of ways. For both baptism and communion are foundational elements within our life’s sacramental journey that we encounter in ordinary and extraordinary ways.

Baptism takes stuff of creation, one of the four ancient elements—earth, air, fire, and water—and joins water to God’s word, written and incarnate, in Jesus’ command to go and baptize (Matthew 28:18–20). Baptism is a grace-full washing, both source and resource of forgiveness. In baptism, we are washed into relationship with God, the creator, as beloved children of God, even as we are immersed in relationship with siblings in Christ. Divisions of humanity are overcome in the radical equality of God’s children—neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female—turning us toward inclusive hospitality and justice, equity, and grace. All are one in the body of Christ. But more, belonging to Christ, we are heirs of Abraham, Hagar, and Sarah, opening us to relationship with Jews and Muslims, among others (Galatians 3:28–29).

In baptism we are anointed with oil, sealed by the Holy Spirit who brooded over the waters at the dawn of creation, and marked with the cross of Christ forever.³ The Holy Spirit descended over the waters of the Jordan when Jesus was baptized, named, and claimed as a beloved child of God and empowered for mission and ministry. The Spirit was there at Nazareth when Jesus preached in his hometown synagogue and invoked Isaiah’s prophetic declaration, “The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news...” (Luke 4:14–19). Similarly, named and claimed as beloved children of God, then sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, we are sent into the world with a vocation of service and love toward our neighbour. Forever. For as long as God’s spirit, the breath of life, lives in us. And beyond. For life eternal is among the promised gifts of baptism. (In Hebrew, “spirit” and “breath” are the same word: *ruach*.)

We are baptized once, but we live that baptism every day in our faith, life, servanthood, and hope. When a person is baptized, they are often presented with a lit

¹ Stephen Larson is a retired ELCIC pastor.

² *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 1164.

³ *ELW*, 231.

baptismal candle and the admonition, “Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”⁴

Born again in baptism as children of God, in worship we hear God’s word, and are fed with the bread of life and cup of salvation in holy communion. The variety of names for communion unfolds the sacrament’s abundant gifts to form and inform faith:

- *Holy communion* is relational with the triune God, and with other children of God, offspring of Abraham, Hagar, and Sarah.
- *Eucharist* means thanksgiving for the blessed bread and wine that bestows grace, mercy, peace, and forgiveness, and sends us forth in loving service.
- *Sacrament of the Altar* has connotations of sacrifice, not only of Jesus’ death upon the cross, but for those who eat and drink, encouraged for sacrificial stewardship of the gifts God has given.
- *Lord’s Table* invokes a theme of hospitality and welcome. It’s neither a Lutheran nor Orthodox table; it is the Lord’s. And that title, *Lord*, once claimed by Roman emperors, points to our ultimate authority in life. Neither emperor nor monarch, president nor prime minister, but Christ the Lord is the one to whom we bend the knee and pledge allegiance.
- *Foretaste of the Feast to Come* anticipates life eternal into which we were baptized and within which we make our sacramental journey until we are reunited with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.
- *Bread of Life and Cup of Salvation* lifts up the life-giving, healing, forgiving dimensions of communion. In their book, *Fearfully and Wonderfully*, Paul Brand and Philip Yancey movingly compare the healing capacity of receiving the sacramental blood of Christ to a blood transfusion sustaining one’s life.⁵

Both baptism and holy communion have been tamed over the centuries. For many in the assembly, baptism or an affirmation of baptism can be a familiar, even boring time on a Sunday morning—but not always. One Sunday at the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Geneva’s English-speaking congregation in Switzerland, three people were baptized—an adult from Kenya, another adult from North America, and the infant child born to a family from India, whose grandfather, a bishop, was present. Here is the insightful testimony of that bishop at that “ordinary baptism” at which I presided in 1995:

It was an ordinary baptism service, but the pastor made it an extraordinary experience. Not only the two baptized adults and the child, but all the 300 and odd members in the congregation felt it was their own baptism as they renewed their baptism vows. The presence of the Spirit was palpable. This happened recently in a Geneva church.

In this baptism service, a particular phrase caught my attention for the first time, though I have participated in baptism services in this church before. It is amazing that there is such unending freshness and inexhaustible insights to be received while reading the Bible or participating in a worship. To the two adults and the child, calling out their names [the pastor] said, “Child of God, *you have been sealed*

⁴ *ELW*, 231.

⁵ Paul Brand and Philip Yancey, *Fearfully and Wonderfully: The Marvel of Bearing God’s Image* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 125–37.

by the Holy Spirit and marked with the Cross of Christ forever.” These are liturgical words, and they caught my attention afresh, so powerfully.

In the Church of South India (CSI) we seldom use the former phrase. We mark the cross on the forehead of the persons and admit them into the fellowship of the church. There is a growing unbiblical trend in the CSI to hold that the sealing of the Holy Spirit or anointing with the Holy Spirit happens at a later, mature stage in Christian life, though the Scriptures remind us that the Spirit is given as an assurance, foretaste, and first instalment of life in Christ (Romans 8:23, Ephesians 1:23). In the service, the Godparents were given certificates of their Godparenthood, reminding them of their responsibility for the Christian nurture of the newly baptized. The certificates contained a prayer to be used at least once a year, on the anniversary of the baptism day.

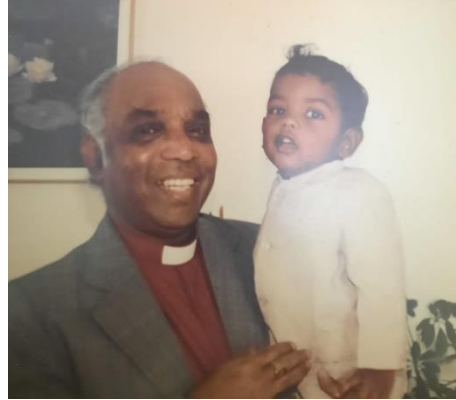


Figure 1 - Bishop Sam Amirtham, Church of South India, Trivandrum, India, and his Grandson, Amal, 1995.

The husband of one of the Godmothers is a nuclear physicist. They belong to the church, but seldom do they attend the Sunday worship. I overheard their conversation, that hereafter, at least once, on the baptism anniversary of their godchild, they will have to go to church! I found it fascinating that a newly born Christian child should “evangelize” a secularised Christian family.

That Sunday, being The Baptism of Our Lord in the Church Year, [the pastor] expounded how Jesus Christ was affirmed by the Father as the “beloved son” at baptism. And then with conviction and courage that spoke to every one present, words choking with emotion in his throat—he announced, “You, each one of you, are a very beloved son or daughter of our Abba Father.” I must have used similar words in my ministry many times. But this time it gripped me as never before.

I came out of the service comforted as a grandfather, empowered as a believer, and challenged as a minister. Do you know the story of your own baptism? When was it? Where? With whom? Were you an infant, child, youth, or adult? Do you observe the anniversary date of that liturgical rite of passage in your life? Who are your Godparents? Have you ever been a Godparent to another person? When has the ordinary become extraordinary for you? Have you ever been moved to tears at a baptism or by the music at such a liturgy?⁶

Another Baptism Story

It was an ordinary pastoral visit until an extraordinary question was asked: “Can we be re-baptized?” It’s not unusual for someone who was baptized as an infant to later want to experience that sacrament again in a new and different way, for example with full immersion and a conscious, intentional profession of faith in Jesus Christ as saviour. Such a request might follow a traumatic illness or other experience leading to a personal re-affirmation of faith or simply within one’s individual faith journey wanting a more personal, mature expression of faith.

⁶ Amirtham, Sam (Bishop, Church of South India, Trivandrum, India), personal correspondence re-printed as “Sealed by the Spirit” in *the Geneva Lutheran* congregational newsletter, Geneva, Switzerland. February 1995.

On this pastoral visit, I was asked by an entire family for such an experience. I was serving as interim pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church in New Hamburg, Ontario, when Dale and Rhonda Egerdee broached the question with me—could they be re-baptized by immersion? Their question led to a series of milestones on their faith journey.

In response to their question, I explained that Lutherans do not re-baptize people unless there is a valid question of whether one had not been baptized earlier in their life. But that was not the case here. Dale had been baptized at St. James Lutheran Church in New Dundee and Rhonda at St. James Lutheran Church in Baden. Their teenage sons, Bradley and Joel, had both been baptized at Trinity in New Hamburg.

They explained that none of them had a conscious memory of their infant baptism and now, at this more mature stage of life and faith, they wanted a conscious declaration of their faith in Jesus Christ and to be baptized by full immersion. Since I couldn't re-baptize them, I suggested that we do an affirmation of their baptism, with full immersion. Sometimes an affirmation of baptism is done with a watery sign of the cross on one's forehead, or by dipping one's finger in the font, or by sprinkling water from a pine bough upon the assembly as the Apostles' Creed is spoken during an Easter Vigil.



Figure 2 - Affirmation of baptism with immersion in Nith River

They thought that was a fine idea.

Through friends, they knew just the place to do the affirmation—at a farm along the Nith River where local Mennonites do their believer baptisms. On a warm September afternoon, we gathered beside the Nith river: Dale, Rhonda, and their sons, Bradley and Joel, along with their friend with a camera, and I.

On the riverbanks we affirmed our faith in the words of the Apostles' Creed and prayed. Then, wading into the water, I reminded them that this was not a re-baptism but an affirmation, a remembrance of their baptisms and so I affirmed them with these words: "Rhonda, child of God, remember that you were baptized in the name of the Father," and I held her back under the water. Then raised her up and continued, "...and of the Son..." and under the water she went again. Raising her up once more I said, "...and of the Holy Spirit..." and for a third time she held her breath and was submerged.

After all four had been immersed in affirmation with similar words, I made a watery sign of the cross on each forehead and said, "[Name] when you were baptized, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever." Then we stepped up out of the river and talked some more as we headed home.

Years later, and in preparation for writing this article on sacraments in faith formation, I met with the Egerdee family in their home and asked them what they remembered of their experience and how they felt after that affirmation.

Dale said, "I felt more complete. It changed things. I felt happier for a while. It affirmed me as a believer." Rhonda commented, "I felt like a believer. It felt like a washing, a fresh start. Bradley mentioned, "I felt peaceful. I could believe." Joel affirmed, "It gave me assurance. It was my conscious decision. I've been reading the Bible more. Sometimes my

girlfriend and I read the Bible together.” Dale concluded, “It gave us a craving to learn more. We’re now doing daily Bible study together as a family.”

That craving to learn more has led the Egerdees on a learning journey. Since their Nith River immersion affirmation, Dale and Rhonda have made two trips to the Holy Land and on those occasions again experienced an immersion affirmation of their baptism, this time in the Jordan River, near Jericho at Qasr El-Yahud. The whole family is now attending The Church in Kitchener, a non-denominational congregation that practices believer baptism.⁷

Holy Communion: Food for Our Faith Journey

Communion also takes stuff of creation—bread from seeds sown in the earth and wine harvested from fruitful vineyard grapes grown in the soil—and prayerfully joins those elements to Christ’s command, “Take and eat. Do this to remember me.”

Fourteen years after my baptism, I had my first communion when I affirmed that infant baptism at my confirmation. My family had recently moved to another, larger city and I was the new kid in a large confirmation class. I was mildly terrified to get my public

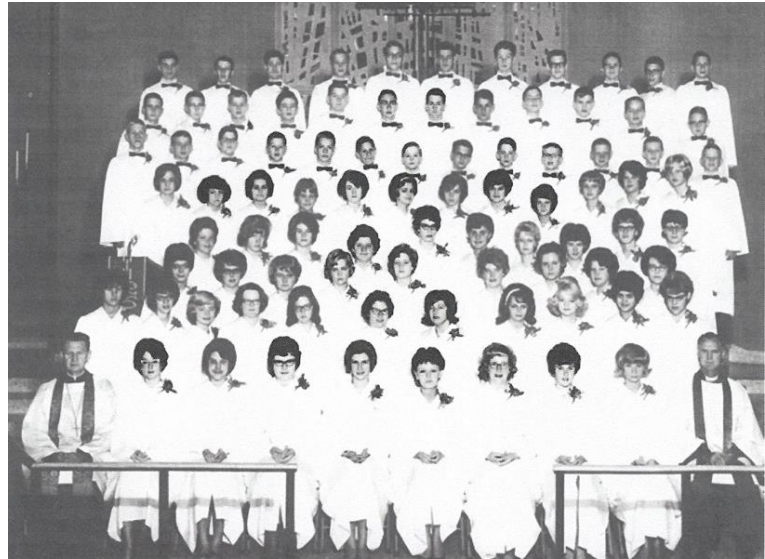


Figure 3 - Confirmation Sunday in Hopkins, Minnesota 1963.

examination question when our whole class gathered in front of the entire congregation. To take my first communion as a teen on Confirmation Sunday, I didn’t expect a theophany so much as I was curious as to what would happen. Not much, I decided, save for a first sip of wine. I wouldn’t have known a “theophany” at that stage of my life anyway, much less the word.

Baptized at the age of three months, I have no conscious memory of that life-changing moment, but thanks to my parents and family, Sunday School, children’s choir, worship, youth ministry and confirmation, the sacrament of baptism grew within me and became increasingly important in my life as a person and years later as a pastor.⁸ As with baptism, after confirmation, the sacrament of holy communion grew within me and became increasingly important in my life as a person—through youth ministry, campus ministry, the

⁷ www.thechurchinkitchener.ca

⁸ As an example of a sermon on the faith formation of sacraments, 73 years after my baptism in 2022, I was invited to preach on the First Sunday in Advent at the congregation where I was baptized in Houston, Texas. Within the sermon’s overview of Advent, I referred to that baptism along with holy communion as an encounter with Christ already, even while anticipating Christ, preparing the way of the Lord *IN* the wilderness in which we find ourselves living our faith journeys today. [<https://m.facebook.com/ctkelc/videos/first-sunday-in-advent-2022-christ-the-king-lutheran-church-livestream/1167333943871626/> Sermon begins at 25’00” and ends at 44’45” with a choral proclamation of Christ present already in our worship through word and sacraments.]

Lutheran World Federation (LWF), seminary, at Taizé, within my marriage, and then continued to grow during decades of pastoral ministry.

Indeed, the sacrament grew within the church as well. When I was a child and youth, communion was once a month. With the arrival of the *Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW)* in 1978, congregations were encouraged to celebrate holy communion every Sunday and festival day.

That increased frequency of communion was accompanied by a wider variety of scripture read in worship. *The Hymnal* was the Swedish, Augustana Synod worship book of my childhood. With a copyright of 1925, it was in an eleventh printing from 1947. Its lectionary contained a one-year cycle of readings, with epistle and gospel readings, but no Old Testament lesson. The 1958 *Service Book and Hymnal (SBH)* was published by the ethnically based churches that later merged into the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) and the American Lutheran Church (ALC). It also had an annual cycle of readings, and this one included an Old Testament lesson. The *LBW* tripled the amount of scripture readings in worship with a three-year cycle of readings from the Hebrew scriptures and New Testament.

My generation received first communion around Grade 9 or 10, age 13 or 14. Years later, the LCA changed practice to allow first communion around Grade 5. Thus began years of “First Communion Classes” for grade school children to orient them to baptismal faith and relationship as well as their inclusion as children of God gathered around a special meal, and a special table in the company of an expanded family.

Still later, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) in its 1991 *Statement on Sacramental Practices*, provided for “communion of the baptized,” joining the Orthodox and other churches in communing children, even the youngest infants, at their baptism.⁹ The little ones joined the body of Christ at the table of the Lord, even as they were welcomed at their family table on ordinary days as well as Thanksgiving and holiday feasts at home.

When has the Holy Spirit moved or surprised you with grace during communion? It’s happened to me scores of times, not only within a church building, but also in hospitals and prisons, on pilgrimages to Corinth and Mt. Sinai, Emmaus and the Mount of Olives, a former Nazi prison chapel near Berlin, with the LWF in Namibia, and the Lutheran Student Movement—Canada in the Canadian Rockies.

Many years ago, in worship, I was startled by a clown. It was an ordinary campus ministry Sunday service, except for the clown standing beside the altar or walking the room, greeting people, smiling, and teasing them, sharing the peace.

Before he became an internationally acclaimed professor emeritus, Rev. Dr. Gordon Jensen was a clown. Following his first year of university, Gordon took a year off to serve as an Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada (ELCC) youth staffer to support youth ministry in congregations. As part of that experience, he attended a “Clowning for Christ” conference in the States and developed a clown character named Epoh (“Hope” spelled backwards).

Clown ministry was quite popular in the 1960s and 1970s. The clown put on a “death mask” of white face paint and then came to life with brightly coloured red lips and rouge cheeks, dark eye liner, and a round, red, rubber nose. Gordon referred to his makeup as his “death and resurrection” mask.

⁹ ELCIC’s *Statement on Sacramental Practices* at <https://www.worship.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Statement-on-Sacramental-Practices.pdf>

The clowns say that the donning of the clown whiteface and costumes is accompanied by prayer in which, following Scripture, the clowns-to-be "die" to themselves and their own desires and concerns and take on a "new man," which is the clown that each is becoming in the mirror.¹⁰

Knowing of Gordon's youth staffer expertise in clown ministry, I invited him to share in leadership one Sunday morning with Lutheran Campus Ministry at the University of Alberta. As the students and faculty arrived, they were surprised to see Epoh walking around in silence. And to my own surprise, Gordon became my teacher that morning. Throughout the liturgy, Epoh would mime various actions. The highlight for me was during the Eucharistic Prayer. As I prayed the prayer and came to the words of institution, Epoh stood at the altar and picked up the loaf of bread and cradled it in his arms, rocking it like a baby. For me Epoh was suddenly a mimed icon of Mary, who gave birth and held the infant Jesus at her breast, rocked him and maybe whispered in awe, "This is my body. This is my blood."

A silent, colourful, "fool for Christ" helped us all to see the Eucharist with new eyes: beloved body of Christ in the bread for the beloved body of Christ in the assembly.

Another Communion Story Where Two or Three Are Gathered

Years later, it was an ordinary pastoral visit to bring communion to a parishioner who couldn't be present at church, but it became extraordinary as Christ passed through locked doors to be present to the faithful, just as he had done that first Easter evening with his disciples (John 20:19). The setting was Cook County Jail in Chicago. I was taking communion to a parishioner who was hoping to be released on bail soon while his sentence was being appealed.

On an earlier prison communion visit to a university student parishioner at another county jail, I'd learned that my personal communion kit containing communion wafers, a small plastic bottle of wine, and a small metal chalice was not something one should try to get through the metal detectors and locked doors. Neither metal nor wine was allowed past those locked doors. So this time I had two wafers and a small lunchbox size carton of grape juice in my coat pocket and carried a Bible and a couple of books.

I had applied for a "contact visit" in person with my friend, not one of those telephone visits through a heavy glass barrier. I followed the guard through several locked doors, carrying Christ in bread and unfermented wine with me. The guard showed me into a small



Figure 4 - Photo from the May 1978 issue of ELCC's *The Shepherd*.

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/11/26/nyregion/for-clown-ministry-laughter-is-gospel.html> (Accessed 16 January 2024.)

meeting room and told me to wait. A short time later, my friend joined me. We embraced. We sat and talked. I told him that I'd brought communion for him from Sunday's service at church. We read Sunday's Gospel. We prayed. I blessed the two wafers and a paper cup of grape juice. We shared communion, knowing that where even two were gathered, Christ was present also.

I gave him the two paperback books I'd brought, knowing that he would pass them along to other inmates after he'd finished reading them. Part of his own personal ministry while incarcerated was to meet with, and mentor, younger inmates to encourage them in their faith journeys even while they were serving time.

One Last Story of Eucharistic Healing and Grace

Once upon a time I was invited by a family to bless their home. I had blessed homes a few times: when a family moved into a new house, or following a criminal break and enter, or following an incident of domestic violence. But this was my first experience encountering a sense of evil in someone's home.

This family had moved to a new home following a violent racist assault against one of their children at his school in their former town. They had sought a new beginning for their children and themselves. Yet within their new home, with their children in new more ethnically diverse schools, the mother felt a sense, even a presence, of evil in the new house. As she described this situation to me, I asked if she and her husband had ever considered blessing their new home. They thought they would like it.

So, we gathered one day in their home. I wanted to bring grace, the presence of Christ, into their home and their lives. I brought along some bread, some wine, and my Bible, and rang their doorbell. We gathered in their living room. I asked the mother where she especially sensed the presence of evil and she responded that it was mostly in the basement in a couple of areas and especially beneath the stairs. We began in the living room. We read scripture. We prayed. We lit a candle and began a walk through the house. Beginning at the front door entrance we read Hebrews 13:2 "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." With the lit candle leading us we proceeded to walk through the house—the kitchen, the bedrooms, the bathrooms. In each room, we read scripture and prayed. A few prayers were adapted from the Compline liturgy for protection from evil.

Then we went downstairs led by the light of the candle. We prayed in the laundry room which the mother had mentioned as one place of her concern. Then I took the candle and crawled beneath the stairwell and there we read Psalm 139:1, 7 & 12 "O LORD...where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? ...Even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you."

Then led by candlelight we went back up the stairs and gathered in the living room around a coffee table which became an altar. I set the candle on the table; set out bread and a chalice of wine. We prayed and invited Christ into their home: "Come Lord Jesus, and be our guest," I began in an impromptu eucharistic prayer. "Come Holy Spirit," we prayed. We shared the Lord's Prayer with an emphasis on the petition, "Deliver us from evil" repeated a couple of times. Then we shared bread and wine around the table. To conclude, I prayed the benediction for the family as well as for their home.

Several days later, the mother contacted me and reported that the sense of evil was gone. She described a new sense of peace she felt when seated in the kitchen for her morning devotions and prayers.

We are washed in baptismal waters and fed with the eucharistic meal. There we encounter abundant grace and forgiveness, healing mercy and peace, hidden, yet revealed, seen, touched, and tasted in our sensuous, sacramental journey of faith. May you taste and see the goodness of the Lord within your own sacramental journey of faith.