

Take and eat? When church members prefer just a blessing

Matt grew up in the Episcopal Church. One Sunday he appeared at the altar—with his arms crossed over his chest.

by [Heidi Haverkamp](#) in the [August 3, 2016](#) issue



Matt moved back home when a job in another state didn't work out. Soon he was attending worship regularly with his parents at the small Episcopal church I served at the time. One evening I met him for coffee. We had an intense conversation about theology, the Bible, and why young adults don't attend church.

Not long after that conversation, Matt appeared one Sunday at the altar but didn't put his hands out to receive communion. Instead, his arms were crossed over his chest—the posture one assumes when asking to receive a blessing. This was unusual, but I put my hand on his head, said a blessing, and thought no more about it.

When Matt continued to do this Sunday after Sunday, however, I began to worry. Why wasn't he receiving communion? Was he in spiritual crisis? I waited a few months, trying not to overreact, before writing him an e-mail to ask about it.

He replied quickly: "I actually just love receiving a blessing each week. Something about being prayed upon is really comforting to me. Every so often, I will get

communion, but for me, I get a lot more out of a blessing!”

I was taken aback. Matt’s not an uninitiated seeker; he grew up in the Episcopal Church. And ours is a tradition that places the Eucharist at the very center of spiritual practice. I became an Episcopalian because I felt a deep spiritual need for the Eucharist on a weekly basis. Yet Matt “gets a lot more out of a blessing”? I would have felt more comfortable if he had confessed to me a terrible sin.

To make things worse, in a follow-up conversation with Matt I learned that I was in fact personally responsible for the seemingly effortless way he declined the sacrament. Every Sunday in our parish, I welcomed anyone who wanted to know Jesus Christ to meet him in the Eucharist. Every Sunday, I also acknowledged anyone who did not feel that call. “You are welcome to *not* take communion,” I said. “You are welcome to come up for a blessing instead.” I had never considered that church members might also hear this as an invitation to choose a blessing. Matt did, and he told me how much he appreciated being offered the option.

Coincidentally, the same night I talked to Matt, my inquirers’ class was scheduled to discuss the Eucharist. I asked the class members what they thought about Matt’s preference for a blessing rather than communion—and two of the six agreed with him! I felt queasy. Can baptized Christians really understand communion as optional, something to forego on a regular basis? Does enabling this practice constitute too much eucharistic hospitality on my part? I worried that I had failed, as their priest, to communicate the significance of what was being offered to them at God’s table.

Later, I sat down with a few of my parishioners to try to understand. Jeanette—who often asked for a blessing instead of Eucharist, though not as frequently as Matt—said that communion is “like I’m taking in a part of Jesus and being cleaned from anything bad. Taking him in clears everything for me.” Blessing, on the other hand, “is like a big hug!” When she’s having a difficult time emotionally, she says, “a blessing is my quiet way of feeling God’s embrace.”

Ken, who grew up Lutheran, doesn’t find communion to be the most meaningful part of worship and has thought about asking for a blessing instead. He has felt too self-conscious to do it. However, sometimes after receiving the Eucharist he goes to the healing ministers, who lay hands on his shoulders and pray for him aloud by name. This gives him “a physical feeling,” he says. It “makes me feel different; it feels like a warmth”—for him, more powerful than receiving communion.

Donna told me she could not imagine choosing a blessing instead of the Eucharist. She grew up Episcopalian, although she went decades without attending church regularly. Now that she has returned, the Eucharist “is the ultimate to me. Receiving communion is the blessing! Ingesting [Jesus]: it doesn’t get any stronger than that. I’m allowed to partake of his body and blood—that’s huge.”

I asked my Facebook network about the practice of opting for a blessing instead of communion in other churches. One person said, “As a person who grew up outside of a eucharistic tradition, ‘laying on hands’ and prayer are often more meaningful for me on a deep soul level.” Another: “As a parent of a small child I have had Sundays when I was too angry and frustrated to receive by the time communion was served.” People told me they’ve chosen a blessing because of a food allergy, an upset stomach, or discomfort with a celebrant. Others said they refrain from communion when they are angry, unable to forgive someone, or otherwise feeling unfit to receive. I couldn’t find much evidence, however, that large numbers of Christians prefer to receive a blessing instead of the sacrament on a regular basis.

With parishioners like Matt and Jeanette, I felt caught between two pastoral roles: host at God’s table and teacher of Christian discipleship. I want to welcome people to meet Christ wherever they are, but does that mean welcoming people to the Eucharist merely according to their preference?

The *mandatum* of Maundy Thursday traditionally refers to Jesus’ command to love one another. Yet Jesus’ grammar at the Last Supper is hard to mistake: *Take, eat. Drink from it. Do this.* These are commands; Jesus is not inviting his disciples to participate if they feel so moved. Clearly, receiving communion regularly is crucial to life in Christ.

Still, I probably will not start saying, “Jesus commanded it, so you all better get yourselves up here.” After all, when Paul addresses the subject of communion participation in 1 Corinthians 11, he doesn’t seem any more worried about people choosing not to receive than he is about the wrong people receiving. He’s upset about something else: receiving without acknowledging the presence of the community. There cannot be some going hungry at the meal while others are drunk (11:21). Communion is not about insiders and outsiders. Paul explains that it is the gravest of sins to “eat and drink without discerning the body”—the body of Christ present in the bread and wine, and the body of Christ present among the people gathered (11:29).

Matt wasn't going hungry or getting drunk, but I wonder whether he felt part of the community at our parish. His life had been interrupted, and he found a haven with us for a while. But he was one of only a few young adults and simultaneously attending worship and classes at two other churches. (He has since joined his fiancée's church.) "It may be that I feel it's something different from the rest of the congregation, to ask for a blessing," he said to me at one point. "I wonder—but no, I don't think so." While he quickly backed off that hunch, it sounded about right to me.

Receiving communion is in part a personal experience. People may prefer a certain kind of bread, wine or juice, sipping or intinction; they may have good reason to choose to abstain sometimes. But communion is also *communal*: we receive as the body of Christ, a shared action larger than individual preference. "Be what you see," said Augustine in a sermon on the Eucharist, "receive what you are." The congregation becomes the body of Christ by receiving. For whatever reason, someone may opt out in favor of a blessing—perhaps feeling lost, confused, or angry. Such a choice signifies standing apart from this mystical and communal wholeness in Christ.

This doesn't mean that it's an act of rejection or arrogance. It's a choice that can be made with great integrity. Christ welcomes Matt, Jeanette, and anyone else who approaches his table—whether or not they receive him that day in the form of bread and wine. Surely, receiving a blessing is as receptive and vulnerable a gesture as open palms. To want a human touch or a hug from God is not a rejection of Christ's sacrifice; it is an acknowledgment of need and the desire for acceptance.

In the Gospels, Jesus welcomes Nicodemus's questions under cover of night, welcomes a shamed and lonely woman's conversation at a well, and welcomes Judas's company at the Last Supper. "Love bade me welcome," writes George Herbert, "yet my soul drew back." Even when we are unable or unwilling to believe we are part of the body, God comes to meet us—even at the threshold, if we can't quite sit and eat.