

The Red Hen and the spirit of Eucharist

Sarah Huckabee Sanders was denied a meal at a Virginia restaurant. I wonder who's welcome at our table.

By [Jim Friedrich](#)

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Jesus loved to break bread with people. He did it all the time—not just with his friends, but with anyone hungry enough to sit down with him, no matter who they were. Sharing a meal together was so much a part of who Jesus was that we who love him practice table fellowship as our most sacred act.

Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, I am with you.

Christ's table is not a privilege of the righteous. Sinners always go to the head of the line. As our primary image of divine hospitality, it is meant to be a place of welcome, not exclusion. Whenever we gather to share the bread of heaven with one another in an act of wondrous love, we become a visible and concrete image of a world come home to God. In the words of [Sylvia G. Dustan's hymn](#):

*We, that once were lost and scattered in communion's love have stood.
Taste and see the grace eternal. Taste and see that God is good.*

The Eucharist reveals the meaning of eating together. Every shared meal is a chance for holy communion. We receive the gifts of the earth, thankful for the labor and skill which have set them before us, and we share them with one another in love and mutual delight. Whenever we eat together with mindfulness and gratitude, we taste and see that God is good.

In [a recent New Yorker essay](#), Adam Gopnik considers “commensality,” the social anthropology of eating. “Nothing is more fundamental to human relations than

deciding who has a place at the table,” he writes, noting that Jesus broke all his culture’s rules when he dined with outcasts and sinners. Turning his attention to our own time, Gopnik then writes, “The modern restaurant—invented in Paris, after the Revolution—is a little temple of commensality: all you need, as shown in so many early Chaplin shorts, is five cents to enter and then to share.”

When Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the White House press secretary, was asked by the owner of Virginia’s Red Hen restaurant to leave the premises without being fed, was the temple of commensality being desecrated? Some have thought so, bemoaning the “incivility” of denying service to a fellow citizen. Doesn’t such an act undermine the norms of peaceful coexistence and exacerbate partisan rancor? Shouldn’t we be allowed to eat in peace no matter who we are?

While acknowledging the importance of civility and social reciprocity, Gopnik argues that “someone who has decided to make it her public role to extend, with a blizzard of falsehoods, the words of a pathological liar, and to support, with pretended piety, the acts of a public person of unparalleled personal cruelty—well, that person has asked us in advance to exclude her from our common meal. You cannot spit in the plates and then demand your dinner. The best way to receive civility at night is to not assault it all day long. It’s the simple wisdom of the table.”

Well said. But once you begin to cross the line into shunning, shaming and excluding, where do you stop? When the cold-blooded Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen sat down in a Mexican(!) restaurant, angry protesters drove her out with cries of “Shame! Shame!” for her complicity in the atrocious abuse of immigrant children. Others gathered outside her home to blast her with the heartbreaking audio of border children crying and wailing in a government detention center.

Responding to the unspeakable cruelties of the Administration, Congresswoman Maxine Waters sounded a [controversial call to arms](#):

We want history to record that we stood up, that we pushed back, that we fought. If you see anybody from that cabinet in a restaurant, in a department store, at a gasoline station, you get out and you create a crowd and you push back on them, and you tell them they’re not welcome anymore, anywhere!

I'm not likely to spot any of those monsters on my little island anytime soon, but if I did, I'd be pretty tempted to remind them loud and clear that racism, bigotry and cruelty are not okay. Uncivil? Perhaps. But as [Mark Sumner writes](#), "the demand being made for 'civility' isn't about language at all. It's about throwing a ring of protection around the powerful. It's about pretending that people whose actions wreck millions of lives on a whim, are cocooned from the consequences of their actions, not just because they have money, and connections, and resources, but because their power puts them on a different plane."

Of course, confrontation can go too far. During the French Revolution, when Marie Antoinette was under house arrest on an upper floor of her palace, a protester stuck the guillotined head of an aristocratic consort on a pole, holding it high to stare at the queen through her bedroom window. One can only imagine what Ms. Antoinette might have tweeted in response!

Returning to the question of commensality, "the wisdom of the table," how should churches respond to the presence of notorious sinners when they come to Christ's table? In the fourth century, St. Ambrose withheld communion from the Emperor Theodosius after his soldiers slaughtered 7,000 Greeks attending a sporting event in Thessalonika. More recently, El Salvador's Archbishop Oscar Romero excommunicated government officials responsible for the murder of priests and nuns.

While the icon of an open and welcoming table is central to Christian practice, there have been those exceptional occasions when it needed to be said that you can't spit on the body of Christ one day and consume it piously the next.

When I was a young priest in Los Angeles, I was asked to assist at the liturgy of a congregation I did not know. After the mass, the rector told me I had given communion to the city's chief of police, whose department was known for abusive practices toward minorities and peace activists. "I didn't tell you beforehand that he was in attendance," the rector told me later. "I was afraid you wouldn't have given him communion."

He laughed when he said this, so I wasn't sure how much he was joking. Had I known, how would I have felt about it? Excommunication is a serious matter, certainly not undertaken spontaneously, without considerable discernment and the blessing of a higher authority (i.e., the bishop, not God, who remains provocatively

silent on such matters). And since “we are all bastards but God loves us anyway”—as [Will Cambell](#), a Baptist preacher and wonderful disturber of the peace, summed up Christianity—who dares to risk the presumptuous task of judging worthiness rather than dispensing mercy?

Still, I wonder. Would I give communion to Hitler? Or Putin? Or Trump? Put the bread of heaven in a hand soaked with so much blood? Assuming they all remained obstinately unrepentant, would I somehow be enabling or endorsing their behavior by affirming their place at the table? Or would giving them communion, even if they received it unworthily, signify that God’s love knows no obstacles, not even the hardened and hateful heart?

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