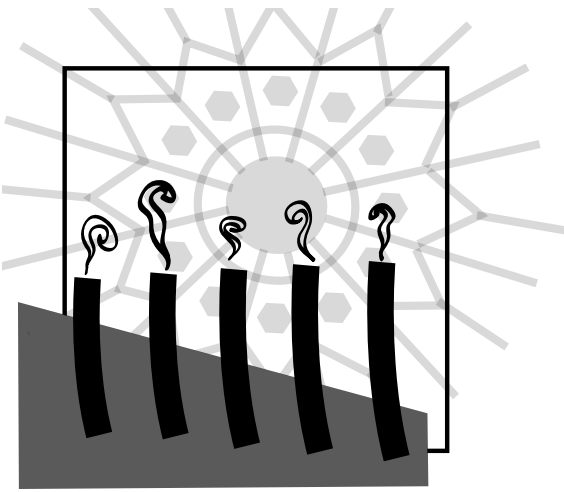


## AT THE RAIL

*Paul Gregory Alms*

Lutheran church architecture has had a history of communion rails at the altar. These rails mark a boundary in the church space, separating the altar from the remainder of the sanctuary. It is the spot where the Lord's Supper is received and where prayers are offered. Also offered are "offerings," most often money but sometimes also bread and wine physically brought forward by the laity.

The spot can appear forbidding and hard, with stiff, unyielding wooden bars that seem to gate off Christ's presence from the people. The people are expected to kneel there, stop at the boundary and lower themselves, while the pastor remains standing, towering over them, hands full. This looks like what some in academia might call a power ritual, a relationship of authority being acted out. At the rail, the pastor and people are separated by a barrier, one submissive and lowered, the other upright and in control.

Beyond this human relationship between pastor and people at the rail, there is an implied connection between people and God Himself. The very need for a rail, a boundary, suggests danger. Fences keep back what is harmful from those on the other side. The rail suggests that the people approaching God must be careful. The Bible has plenty of stories to back up this idea. People fall dead at wrongful touch of the wooden ark of the covenant. The people of Israel trembled at the foot of dreadful Mount Sinai. Ananias and Sapphira were struck down in the book of Acts. There is terror at the approach of sinful people to a holy God. The rail suggests all this. The people bow, they kneel, they close their eyes. They hold out hands in surrender.

The rail makes the greatest of us small. All are broken-down sinners at the rail. The man intent on covering up his sin must in any event bend his knee. His body confesses what his pride refuses to allow him to say. The rich and the poor, the single and the married, the charter member and the visitor, the Alzheimer's patient and the doctor: all crush the same red carpet with their bony knees, all hold out the same empty hands, all await the same blessing. The rail stands in front of us all, impeding our progress, slowing us

down, making us stop and look up to where God rules and reigns and looks down.

But time at the rail teaches other lessons too, surprising ones. What the rail suggests, what the untrained eye sees at first glance, turns out to be only one small part of the story. The moments spent at the rail end up being not only moments of humility but also of camaraderie, fellowship, even gentleness. This wooden hurdle does not cause people of faith to stumble but invites them to receive. It is a wall that doesn't keep out or exclude those who approach but brings them closer to what they desire and need.

The unexpected kindnesses begin in the union of pastor and people. The moments spent at that imposing wooden shelf form an unexpected closeness and a trust between pastor and people. One might even call them a time of tenderness or softness. The words "at the rail" do not suggest this sort of interaction between pastor and people, and the relationship between pastor and flock is hard to discern at the altar. Other places may seem more important: small groups, hospital rooms, home visits, counseling sessions, the meetings of the church, or social action. Yet the moments a pastor spends at the rail are among the most important in the ministry to God's people.

Some of the most profound pastoral care happens not only in counseling sessions but at the rail. There the pastor prays: for the grieving, for the soldier dad far away in Iraq, for those in sickness and childbirth and travel and surgery and celebration. It is at the rail that marriages begin in God's name. There the pastor blesses and sends off the congregation. The fruit of hours of labor are offered with joy and thanksgiving.

At the Lord's Supper, there at that rail, the pastor and people meet in a most intimate way. Each individual comes forward and the pastor's fingers place bread on the tongue or in the hand. There is a closeness at that instant which often goes unnoticed for its frequency. It is a physical act, a palpable touching. Hands and lips and teeth and chewing. Like little birds do the Christians open their mouths. Often the pastor misses and touches lips, cheeks, noses with hands

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sometimes moist from the mouths of the flock. A tangible bond is present, even if it is sometimes accidental, embarrassing. In what other setting do grown men with calloused hands, rough from factories and farms, kneel down and permit themselves to be hand-fed by another adult? Where else can you see proud CEOs and proper, well-heeled ladies bend their bodies and sip and slurp from a common cup, sharing drink with all others in the room?

Added to all this is the human condition of those approaching the rail for the sacrament. The pastor knows their sins, their tears, their smiles, their grief, the family heartbreaks and happiness, the mental illness, the suffering. Many struggle even to make it to the rail, weighed down by age or frailty. Yet they come, many stubbornly so, with middle-aged caretaker children trying to discourage them, trying to make things easier, urging them to stay in the pew (“They will bring communion to you, sit down!”). But on they come to the rail. The young family struggles to keep kids from scurrying around and under and on the rail. The widow wipes away a tear. The stiff, unhappy faces of couples estranged and struggling with a marriage in trouble show themselves there.

Among all these kneeling frail people, the pastor stands with a presence that can be imposing, vested with physical signs of authority. But the surprising kindness comes at that very moment of weakness on the part of the people. The pastor, towering over them, is not there to berate or judge or even educate them, but comes to them, hands heavy with gifts, gifts of divine favor and mercy. Bending down to feed the people, giving them to drink, serving them, the pastor turns out to be a lowly waiter serving tables. The “power ritual” flips upside down. The lowly ones are served by the one marked with clout. The one elevated in royal robes is in truth the servant at the bottom of the rung, serving those who kneel.

Yet the reality of what happens at

the rail between pastor and people is really only a window to a greater surprise. To come to the rail is, in the end, to obey an eschatological summons. The altar rail demands from those who approach a humility before God. The rail reminds us of our mortality

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as our bones creak and complain at the indignity of lowering our bodies. The rail forces us to feel what we hate: that we are weak and small and helpless. A body meets God at the rail, the true God, a God of power vested with the stars and sun and moon and holding in His hands hurricanes and thunder and fire. Our coming forward to this rail anticipates the final meeting with this God.

At this final altar rail, our prospects don’t appear so good. God can push His advantage, parade His power and justice upon rebellious sinners. We, in the depths of our being, expect Him to extract His due: punishment, extinction. There is a power relationship between the almighty one and those far below, under His authority. Debt, obligation, terror are the responses from those cowering on their knees

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before this God. It is hard to wish in truth and sincerity to come to the rail.

But at this rail of last resort, at the rail separating creator from creature, at this barrier between the end of this world and the beginning of the new, we find a surprise, something not found in the world or in our experience of fallen daily life. The powerful one on the other side of the rail is

familiar to us and beckons to us. The God of the universe and the God Who holds all things in His hand turns out to have face like ours. The one Who rides the clouds and Whom we fear to meet has a human face, a face acquainted with grief and dread. God the awful judge is a human figure with hands split open by nails, with a side draining water and blood. At the rail we meet a God not anxious to extract some advantage or divine tax from us, or to drain assets from His inferiors to fill His own coffers.

No, we find at the rail that the God of heaven and earth kneels beside us. That is the greatest surprise. The Lord of the Scriptures, the living God, joins us on our knees, joins us in the fear and guilt and sin and death to face His Father. God is on both sides of the rail. He kneels with us and offers Himself with our offerings, prays with us in our prayers, despairs with us in our despair, dies with us as our creaking bones and guts ultimately fail. Jesus is on our side of the rail as we face His Father. He faces the rail with us as we face the one who made us and meets us at the final barrier.

God is on both sides of the rail. He is the fearful other, the one beyond all beyond, the one great judge and Father outside all thought and imagination. He is the one from Whom our thoughts turn away in terror, for He brings all things to light. He is the one from Whom nothing is hidden. He is the fire on Sinai, the holy ark, the avenger, the just and holy God.

And He is the one kneeling, bleeding, dying with us. When we come to the rail, we face a holy and terrible God, and next to us, as we face that God, is... God, our brother, Jesus.

The rail turns out to be the meeting place of God and His people but not just this. It is also the meeting place of God the Son and God the Father, and we are caught up in their encounter. It is the place where God Himself resolves our situation into His, the place where judgment bleeds into union, where in the body and blood of Christ God-in-flesh is fed to Chris-

tians and Christians take God into themselves and the body grows into the head.

The rail is a place of surprises for Christian people. The mighty bend down and the lowly are exalted. Authority serves and fear is conquered by love. All this in a church, at a simple wooden rail, where people kneel, prayers are said, and food is eaten. *✠*

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## SUNDAY'S SERMON

*Thomas R. Decker*

This  
sermonic egg  
is hatched slowly  
in between household  
chores and visiting shut-ins  
and watching the kids and going  
to the store and talking on the phone  
and writing a letter and teaching confirmation class  
and getting ready for the next one and getting  
gas for the car and groceries for the  
weekend and talking to  
somebody you hadn't  
seen in  
years  
  
and at some point  
the Holy Spirit  
slips in the back door  
and makes himself at home  
pours a cup of coffee and says  
I got the time  
when you do.