

EFFICACY

--Efficacy. Are you familiar with the word?

The ability to produce an intended or desired result. That's the dictionary definition for it. The word is derived from a Latin verb (*efficere*), meaning "to accomplish."

In short, efficacy is about positive results. It's about effectiveness, successfulness, potency, productiveness.

If, say, you have high blood pressure and you take a certain drug to remedy the problem, and subsequently your blood pressure is lowered, the drug is said to have efficacy. It does what it is supposed to do.

Of if, say, you undertake a particular regimen of diet and exercise by which to lose 10 pounds within a determined allotment of time and, at the conclusion of that period, you have lost 12 pounds, the course of action taken can be said to demonstrate efficacy. It achieves what it is designed to do.

--OK. But just what does any of that have to do with us here?

I would shift your attention to the altar, bedecked with those shiny trays containing bread and juice, the elements involved in this morning's Communion observance.

With our focus on them, the thought-provoking question on this occasion is this: Is there any meaningful sense in which these elements can be said to have efficacy? Do they effectively accomplish what they are intended to accomplish?

In order to ascertain that, we first need to state what precisely that hoped-for result is. It is that which would constitute the measure of Communion's efficacy, right?

The body of Christ, the bread of life, we say over the loaf. The blood of Christ, the cup of blessing, we say over the juice. In each instance, it's more than just fancy, empty phrases. Both intend to remind us of what exactly it is to which we literally are opening ourselves, swallowing, digesting, and assimilating into our very physical beings. Things spiritual, representing in very tangible form the things of Jesus, become "incorporated" (literally, "taken into the body") or "incarnated" (literally, "taken into the flesh").

That said, "incorporated" or "incarnated" to what "intended or desired" end? Well, the object is one of transforming human beings, moving them from the baseline of where they are and in the direction of their becoming themselves in fact more Christ-like. Where Communion is concerned, efficacy is measured specifically in terms of whether or not, after receiving the elements, there is any real difference occurring in us.

The blood pressure before and the blood pressure afterwards are not the same results; things have changed for the better, thanks to the efficacious intervention. The numbers that appear on the scale before and after all the dieting and sweating are not the same results; things have changed for the better, thanks to the efficacious intervention.

Consider what awaits us on that altar, then, as this morning's intervention, designed to change things in us, and among us, for the better.

--Here's where the metaphors break down a bit: In the case of that blood pressure med, efficacy is related to the chemical composition of the pills that we take. In the case of that weight-loss regimen, it is related to the healthy new balance of the right foods and the patterns of being physically more active. In both of these instances, efficacy is dependent upon something "out there," something external to us--the chemicals, the new habits.

In Communion, however, it is the reverse. The mystery of its efficacy is not to be found externally, inside the bread or inside the drink, for these are absolutely ordinary things. There's nothing magical or supernatural about either of them. Where this eating and drinking are concerned, the transformative potential exists, not within the elements, but within us. There is no other way to explain the fact that here we have the same elements, but mixed results among us. Either we are receptive and responsive to what this eating and drinking represent, or we are not--which alone accounts for the presence or absence of any efficacy.

If, then, after our Communion, there is no difference in us to be experienced or observed, it is never the failure of the bread or of the juice/wine. The fault lies singularly with us. If there is to be a potent, effective, productive change within us, then we must be awake and engaged in what is wholly possible here. Otherwise, we're just getting in our own ways.

--And that takes us back to the apostle Paul, chiding his Corinthian converts with respect to missing the point in their Communion practices. Apparently, they view the sacred bread and wine as nothing but common bread and wine, treating the elements accordingly and approaching them with gluttony and drunkenness.

In failing to appreciate the spiritual dimension symbolically present by way of those elements, Paul says that they eat and drink "without discerning the body" (11.29)--which is to say, failing to perceive in, or to receive from, that food and drink something far greater than just food and drink.

That, he declares, is to eat and drink "unworthily"--eating or drinking in a worth-less, un-worth-while manner. In short, in a manner that completely lacks efficacy, one that fails to make any positive difference at all in those ridiculous Corinthians.

--So, again, it is to be asked: Is there any meaningful sense in which these elements can be said to have efficacy? Are they effectively able to accomplish what they are intended to accomplish?

Well, that all depends upon us.
Doesn't it?