

St. John's, Albany
2 August 2015

10 Pentecost- B

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

Ephesians 4:1-6

John 6:24-35

The text for the sermon comes from the gospel: *Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.*

And also from story of the Prodigal Son in Luke's gospel:

Now his elder son was in the field and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has got him back safe and sound.

Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to pleaded with him. But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!

Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

It may surprise you to know that ELCA doctrine not only permits, but also recommends communing infants and children. And to tell you the truth, in my years as a parish pastor I have learned more from children about communion than anything I have ever taught them.

But what *do* I teach them? Well, Shea and Joel and Ralf could tell you because we did our first Holy Communion training just a couple of months ago. Basically, what I told them, what I tell other children we get together to talk about it is that Holy Communion is like a family meal. It is a time to gather and talk, to laugh, to bring our concerns. It is a time to satisfy our

hunger with something delicious our mother or father has made. And when you're hungry after a long day, even the simplest thing can be super-scrumptious.

And I always ask kids what they like to eat. But I already know the answer. You want to guess what they say? It's pizza, always.

Then I ask, how about at Christmas? And Easter? Who do you eat with at Christmas and Easter? I'm trying to get them to imagine a big dinner with lots of family members jammed around the never-large-enough dining room table.

Then we talk about special holiday food. Not pizza, but turkey and stuffing. And birthday cake. Special days, special food.

That's what holy communion is like, I say. It's a big family dinner and we're all crowded together. Only what makes it different is that it's not *special* food (though as we typically share Holy Communion in churches, I can't imagine why anybody would think a Styrofoam-flavored wafer the size of a big man's thumbnail and a little shot of port is everyday food). But I explain to them that at the original Last Supper Jesus wanted to use common things, things all people ate and drank.

So what's a common food people eat in some form or another every day? I ask. (The answer, of course, is bread. French bread, Italian bread, Portuguese sweet bread, southern corn bread, Irish soda bread, Greek Easter bread, Jewish rye bread, Swedish rye bread, Boston brown bread, Parker House rolls, Pillsbury biscuits, Jiffy corn muffins. There are a million different kinds.)

And bread is what they usually say. (And then we talk about how in Asia rice is the same as bread and that if Jesus had been Asian he might have used rice. Or rice cakes, anyway, so there would be something to break.)

Then I show them the wafer, either the little ones that everybody gets or the big, three-inch diameter one that is broken in half during the Words of Institution. It's hard to break a thumbnail-sized wafer; the bigger one is supposed to convince us more readily that this is bread. Or Jesus' body. Or both, even though it bears no resemblance to either one.

One time—this is my favorite first Holy Communion story—one time I held up the big wafer for the kids to see and I asked what was the common food everybody ate in some form or another.

“Quesadillas!” a little boy crowed, looking at the three-inch round wafer I was holding. Well, it does sort of look like a quesadilla!

Then I start in about the wine. The wine, I explain, may not be something we drink every day, though maybe your parents have wine with dinner—neglecting to mention that their pastor does. But way back then, I

say, making wine was the best way to preserve liquids. There were no refrigerators, I tell them. We know that, their eyes tell me back.

So Jesus took wine, I say, because it was a common item and he wanted people to remember him through common items—bread, wine, the water of baptism—so that it was clear he didn't come to be with just the rich people or the special people, but with everybody, anybody who ate bread and drank wine (or juice) and washed with water.

The kids nod. They don't ask me theological questions like whether this is a *memorial* supper, like some Protestants say, or the *real presence* like the Lutherans and the Catholics and I don't know who all else insist. They don't ask me about why Jesus did what he did. They don't tell me they're worried it's a little too cannibalistic for them. They're not here for theological chit-chat. They're here for the right reason—because Jesus has something good to eat that he wants them to have.

So they don't ask me adult questions—thank God. Instead they eye those little glasses I've poured—two for each of them. One holds grape juice, the other wine. They eye those little round tiddly-wink wafers that they've seen their parents eat. They know those little discs are too plain-looking to taste good. But they still want to sample them.

And that's what we do next. Each child tastes a wafer, then drinks up both little glasses. Most wrinkle their noses at the wine, though I had one little girl who knocked it back like a shot of Jack Daniels. I think she'd seen her parents do something like that before!

And that's about it, in terms of how I prepare children for Holy Communion. Then, the very next Sunday they come to the table with their families. There's no fuss, no muss, no white dresses and gloves. Just this little talk with the pastor. And I love to watch their faces that next Sunday. They wear smug little smiles that say "it's my first time."

The children *enjoy* communion. They are much, much more avid about taking delight in it than most adults. They straighten their arms and reach out all the way to hold their hands out to me. Their smiles beam. You should see their faces—I wish you could. And you should hear what I hear—one time a child said "Yay!" when I handed him the wafer. I heard a child another time turn to her parents and say "Yummy." Another time I heard on child say, with a critic's poise, "This is really very delicious."

I believe children receive communion in the spirit in which Jesus intended for it to be received: with joy and appreciation, each week a little home-coming to the table of our Lord.

Remember the feast given from the Prodigal Son? It was a homecoming party. When the disgruntled older brother complains that his

brother neither earned nor deserved this fast, the wise father says: “But we *had* to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come home. He was lost and he has been found.”

I believe we do a grave wrong if we think of Holy Communion as a re-enactment of Christ’s last supper with his friends. We can remember their last supper and commemorate it as we do on Maunday Thursday. But when we gather here together we are not memorializing Jesus’ death. Instead we are gathering at a meal of homecoming *to* Jesus. And that’s what makes it a festive meal.

And how easy it is to lose sight of that. How easy it becomes to see this feast of Christ’s love as something somber and weighty. How easy it is for us to be the weary elder brother, not wanting to show up for the party because he didn’t believe his brother deserved it.

Somehow children seem to get it: We are *not supposed to be* the elder brothers. We are called to be the grateful, though undeserving, prodigals, coming to the communion rail for the feast that Jesus has made for us. And not just his heart and soul, but his whole body has gone into this feast that we may be fed, be strengthened, be welcomed, made to smile and laugh, made to love and—most powerfully—to live.

Jesus left his friends behind after the last supper. But he left them behind precisely so that he could gather us to him in feasting, as forgiven wanderers, as welcomed back runaways, as hungry hostages freed from sin. Jesus left his friends behind and left his life behind in order to disappear into us, in order to make us become the body of Christ.

When we come to the table, we are not Peter or James or John or Judas or Thomas or Philip or maybe any of the women who were there whose names didn’t make it into the book. No, when we come to the table of the Lord, we do not come as disciples with hearts about to burst from coming sadness.

We come to the table as prodigals approaching the feast that celebrates our homecoming. And each time we receive the bread and wine into our hands and into our bodies, we are given exactly what it is we truly need: the promise of God’s abiding and eternal presence.

What is the right response to this gift of God’s love? Eager faces, outstretched arms, hunger, curiosity, gratitude. And a willingness to genuinely taste and see that the Lord is good. Amen.