

Reclaiming Our Birthright ~ Welcoming Children in God's Name

Tim Hegedus and Pamela Hegedus Pederson write their church...

Dear Friends in Christ,

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all!

Early one morning, a five year-old child exclaims, "I'm hungry!" "What would you like for breakfast?" asks the sleepy-eyed parent, heading for the cereal cupboard. "Steak n' HP sauce!" replies the child boldly. Talk about hungry!

Hunger—physical, spiritual, emotional—is basic to our human experience. This reality of life is recognized in Holy Communion which involves the distribution of something to eat and drink to people who are hungry. In the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada, our understanding of Holy Communion leads us to recognize the basic need of all people, including children, to be fed at the Lord's table in accordance with the abundance of God's grace. Frequent Holy Communion models how we are all called to participate abundantly and graciously in the feeding of our hungry world. How important it is for children, and everyone, to witness such boundless generosity happening at our altar table!

Historically, children have usually been seen as inferior to adults. For example, in New Testament times, under ancient Roman law, a father had the power to choose whether or not to acknowledge and raise a child after it was born. Jesus' disciples also saw children as inferior, until Jesus showed them a different way, as St. Mark tells us:

People were bringing little children to Jesus in order that he might bless them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. (*Mark 10:13-16*)

Can we picture the disciples' surprise when Jesus rebukes them? Jesus' treatment of children was completely different from what the disciples were expecting! It is not easy for adults to accept the inverted, upside down values of God's love where the lowly are lifted up and the powerful are brought low, where the hungry are filled with good things and the rich are sent away empty (*Luke 1:52-53*) and where children can join adults with full access to Jesus' presence.

Not so long ago, if parents dared to bring their children to worship, they were expected to "hush" them and keep them quiet. There was usually little, if anything, in the worship service that welcomed children's participation. Too often the effect has been to exclude children from knowing and experiencing themselves as part of the family of God which gathers at worship. Unintentionally, the "message" that was being communicated was that, like the disciples, we believed children should be kept at a distance from Jesus. But the voice of Jesus is still calling, "Let the little children come to me!"

In 1991, the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada approved the practice of "communion of all the baptized". This means that all the baptized, including baptized children, are welcome to partake of Holy Communion in our church. The ELCIC's decision has enabled us to "catch up" to those other churches, such as the Eastern Orthodox, where infant communion has always been practiced. Above all, communion of all the baptized means that our hospitality toward children is not just theoretical. It is a practical way for us to follow the example of Jesus who welcomed children to himself.

In partaking of the Lord's Supper we Christians experience our unity, our oneness in Christ: in the words of St. Paul, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (*1 Corinthians 10:17*). Since our church baptizes all people (including children), how can we refuse to welcome all the baptized (including children) to the Lord's table? It is, after all, Christ's table—not ours!

The main reason for our former practice of withholding communion from children had been a concern that they understand the meaning of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It was felt that instruction in the meaning of the sacrament (as part of confirmation instruction) ought to precede receiving the sacrament. And certainly we continue to emphasize the need for instruction for children as well as adults.

A passage of Scripture that is sometimes raised in this regard is 1 Corinthians 11:29: "For all who eat and drink without discerning the body eat and drink judgment against themselves." Some Christians use this passage to say that unless people understand the bread of the Eucharist to be the body of Christ (that is, unless people accept the doctrine of the "Real Presence" of Christ in the Eucharist) they should not be permitted to receive communion. But surely anyone—including children—can be taught that Jesus is "really present" in Holy Communion. Children can learn to experience the "Real Presence" of Christ in the Eucharist. There is no reason why basic instruction with regard to communion cannot be given to children at an early age: children can and do learn that Jesus really comes to us and lives within us when we eat the bread and drink the wine at his table. And further instruction in the meaning of the sacrament can and should continue thereafter. Indeed, learning about the meaning of the Eucharist is a life-long experience! The Eucharist is a mystery that is simple enough for a child to accept but profound enough for us to spend the whole of our lives fathoming its depths.

Also, it is important to read 1 Corinthians 11:29 in its context. When Paul writes here about "discerning the body", he is not talking about the mode of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. Instead, the "body" that Paul is referring to is the church: the "body of Christ" is Paul's favourite way to describe the church throughout 1 Corinthians. Paul's view of the Eucharist emphasizes our oneness with Christ and with one another in the church (see *1 Corinthians 10:17*). Lack of oneness is the specific problem Paul is addressing in much of 1 Corinthians, including 11:29, where Paul is concerned with the divisions among the Christians at Corinth: specifically, people are eating separately from one another, and some are gorging themselves and getting drunk while others have nothing to eat (*1 Corinthians 11:17-22*). It is to counter this that Paul emphasizes the "oneness" (*koinonia* in Greek) aspect of the Eucharist: if we fail to recognize our oneness in the body of Christ, if we are separate and divided from one another, then we eat and drink "in an unworthy manner" and we are not "discerning the body" (*1 Corinthians 11:27-29*).

The Apostle Paul's concern is with relationships and unity. Yet the rules that have been imposed around Holy Communion have instead separated Christians from each other. Such denial of our oneness (*koinonia*) in Christ is precisely what Paul was fighting against! Surely Paul's point is still relevant for us today: since Christ welcomes all of us to his table, how can we ever exclude one another or be divided from one another at the table of Holy Communion?

Grace and peace be with you all!

Your brother and sister in Christ,

Tim and Pam.



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