

Welcoming Children to the Lord's Table

Mark 9: 30-37 (2006)

Pastor Alan Lai

"The Lord's Supper is God's meal for the baptized. Admission to the Supper is by Christ's invitation, offered through the church to the baptized." (6.9)

"We are committed to eucharistic hospitality. Baptized persons of Lutheran and other Christian faith communities are welcome to the Lord's Table." (6.13)

Statement on Sacramental Practices (ELCIC), 1991

Christianity has gone through many stages of development. The Christian faith as we know today is a product of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment has made reason the pinnacle of human existence. In order to make Christianity a rational and scientifically sound religion, the Enlightenment has turned Christianity into a religion of doctrines and beliefs. It is evident in many Christian denominations that obsession with right beliefs precedes right actions. Focusing on the mind and the intellect becomes the focal point of Christian learning. As the product of the Enlightenment, Christianity is not known to the public as a religion of compassion, love and mercy but a set of doctrines. The public perception is that people have to believe x, y, and z, otherwise they are doomed. Such insistence on beliefs can potentially turn Christians into merciless sales-professionals rather than messengers of love and forgiveness. Christianity runs the risk of being a religion of head, not of heart looking after the whole person. One of the results of this inclination toward dogmas and beliefs is that the church makes confirmation a requirement of the Lord's Supper. With this belief, children are refrained from taking the Lord's Supper because they don't understand.

The intellect is an important faculty of being human. We should by no means minimize the usage of it. Yet, the obsession of it makes Christianity dry. Should knowledge or reason be a requirement for partaking in the Lord's Supper? Or should there be any requirement at all?

When Jesus initiated the Lord's Supper, it is safe to say that none of his disciples understood the significance of Jesus' words: Eat my flesh, drink my blood. Yet they were the first participants of the holy supper. Today's gospel reading said Jesus' disciples did not understand Jesus' teaching. That is comforting!

The ELCIC *Statement on Sacramental Practices* makes it clear that the Lord's Supper is God's meal for the baptized. When a child is baptized, the pastor applies oil in his/her forehead and says, "You are marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit forever." It is an act of welcome to the Christian family. Children were made members of the church through baptism. Although they cannot reason the way adults do and they cannot vote, they are full members of Christ's church. The Lord's Table is God's family meal initiated by Christ and it is intended for all members of the family. Through partaking the elements the church calls "bread" and "wine," our faith is being nourished by the presence of Christ. It is the spiritual food of heaven that sustains and nourishes the faithful. Yet, for a long time, the church made intellectual ability a requirement for the Table. Would you ask a two-year old to explain the mechanism of rice cooking before giving him/her a bowl of rice when it comes to dinner? If the child fails to answer your

questions intellectually, will you say to the child, “Stand aside or leave the table?” Intellectual ability has nothing to do with eating together as a family. The family sits down and eats together because they belong, not because they understand. My son sits down and eats with me because he is my son and I am his father. The **only** requirement for the table fellowship is that my son is in a familial relationship with me (or they are my guests). When it comes to spiritual nourishment such as the Lord’s Supper, God does not turn children away, we do.

While confirmation is an important educational opportunity for one to deepen one’s faith, the church mistreated it by turning it into a requirement for fellowship with Christ. (Some even further the abuse by turning a non-member of a particular denomination away from the Table). The irony is that if you ask me what I am eating during communion, I don’t know either. The Lutheran church teaches the real presence of Christ in the Supper. But I could not fully explain to you the details of it - it is a mystery. A lot of the church doctrines should be regarded as a mystery of faith. For Lutherans, we always insist that there is no “if” in our acceptance into God’s family. We are welcome not because we are able, but we are forgiven. Partly due to the advancement of science and scientific reasoning in the last century, the church felt the pressing need to explain the Christian faith in a logical and scientific manner. That might have potentially taken the heart out of Christianity. To explain a faith tradition in scientific fashion is to flatten the beauty of human experience – we come this far by faith. Although not to suggest the things we believe in have no reasons for it, reason stops short in making us Christians. To think that we can contain God in our nicely pre-programmed logic of mind and proposition is to show our stupidity. Could such a fallacy be the *reason* why some people turn their backs to Christianity?

In today’s gospel text, Jesus says, “If one welcomes a child, one welcomes not me, but the one who has sent me.” In Jesus’ times, children have no status. People do not take children seriously. Nobody listens to children and children are being ignored by society. Jesus passionately argues the otherwise. If we welcome a child, we welcome God. That is provocative! The challenge for us is this: What would our worship and church life look like if we believe and take Jesus’ teaching seriously?

To conclude, any family who wants their children to receive the Lord’s Supper, please contact Pastor Alan. Pastor Alan can arrange a brief instruction session for children (i.e. First Communion) 30 minutes prior to a Sunday worship service. It could be done with an individual family or as a group. (Note: This procedure is NOT a requirement. I spell it out only if the family desires). Lastly, this church is deeply respectful to those who think otherwise and/or would like more study on this issue. Even with disagreement or question, they are welcome to come to the Table. When they come, just fold their hands and ask for a blessing. Instead of giving the elements, Pastor Alan will mark the sign of the cross on the forehead and say a blessing. Pastor Alan wishes everyone who comes to the Table to experience spiritual nourishment.

People don't care how much we know until they know how much we care. (Author unknown)