

Reflections on Faith and Life for October 18, 2020

How long has hygienically sealed communion been around? Someone asked me that a while ago. If I answered, my answer was incorrect. I remember now that we first heard about pre-packaged communion my last year in seminary, 1998-1999. One of our professors had read that it was available in *vending machines*!!! [Feeling guilty? cut off from God's love? For only a quarter, get your sins forgiven, and leave this vending machine alcove with joy!] Oh, wait—it's the *wine* that offers forgiveness of sins, and back then they offered only the wafers. Darn!

I hope you realize the above was written tongue in cheek. The Lord's Supper is at the same time one of the solemn rites of the Church and one of the joyful celebrations of the Church. We receive what we already are: the Body of Christ, and also the full and free forgiveness of all our sins. Communion is the ultimate intimacy we share with our Lord in this life.

Some denominations, including Lutherans of the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods, refuse to serve communion to non-members. They base this decision on Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, chapter 11:27-29: **Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For those who eat and drink *without discerning the body of Christ* eat and drink judgment on themselves.**

The ELCA and its "predecessor bodies," the LCA and the ALC, interpret "the body of Christ" here as the communion of saints, the fellowship of believers. We understand Christ's body and blood to be one of the unifying factors within Christianity. *We receive what we already are: the Body of Christ.* The LCMS and LCWS perceive the "earthly elements" of bread and wine differently, though I'm not quite sure in what way. They say if "we" don't believe the same way they do, we're not worthy of receiving the Lord's Supper—and I think their pastors believe that *they* would be answerable to God for serving Holy Communion to unworthy folk.

One more explanation: the Roman Catholic Church believes that the wafer *becomes* the body of Christ and the wine *becomes* his blood in that moment when the priest speaks the "Words of Institution": "Jesus took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them, saying 'This is my body, given for you,'" and likewise that the wine *becomes* his blood. The "Reformed" churches (Methodist, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Episcopal, and several others) believe that Holy Communion is a "memorial meal," meant to remind us of Christ's love and sacrifice for us. We in the ELCA believe that Christ is truly present in the sacrament, and we receive, by faith, his true presence when we eat the bread and drink the cup.

As an ELCA pastor I invite everyone present to receive the eucharist (Greek for "thanksgiving"). Christ is the Host of the table, and I am merely his vessel. Many ELCA congregations (probably most, outside the Midwest!) offer communion to infants as soon as they're baptized. You know I would love to do that. Jesus said, **Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs** (Matthew 19:14).

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What a wonderful gift we would offer young children by letting them feel they're part of this body of Christ! If they grow up receiving from little on, they will truly "discern the body of Christ" and perhaps crave it as they get older; this could be a building-block for keeping those we confirm from believing they've "graduated" from "church."

Since the very word "communion" means "union with," I personally am filled with longing to share the sacrament with you, my sisters and brothers in Christ. How hard it is to be separated from the communion of saints during this extended COVID crisis! But: above I wrote that *communion* is "one of the unifying factors within Christianity." The principal unifier is the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, sent to the first disciples on Pentecost, 50 days after Jesus' death. Each of us received the gift of the Spirit when we were baptized, "sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever."

Dear friends, *believe* in that Holy Spirit! In this time of distancing and distress, *remember* that we are one with another, and that Jesus promised to be with us **always, even to the end of the age** (Matthew 28:20). Reach out to one another with prayer, by phone or text or other social media. *Be* the light of Christ for the smaller worlds to which the coronavirus has confined us.

Be safe, be blessed!

Pastor Gail