

Children Are Welcome at Our Table: Stories and philosophies

Trinity Lutheran Church, Canada

Katie's Party

I was visiting a friend-a pastor in the Niagara area-one day, in his church, some years ago. His wife was there, as was mine. As the four of us chatted, our friends' daughter, Katie, wandered up to the sanctuary, where she could be seen miming the actions of Holy Communion. Katie was only four or five years old at the time. As she paced along the broad step, she could be heard uttering the words "a little drink" over and over again. Later, came the words "Jesus' bread. Jesus' bread. Jesus' bread." Then there followed a really good imitation of her father's post-communion blessing -to his slight embarrassment- with arms uplifted and outstretched in a grand, almost theatrical, embrace.

That was many years ago. What was clear, then, was that communion had become a very large part of the reality of Katie's world. Perhaps that was not surprising, as Katie communed every Lord's Day. What was not clear was what Katie understood by "communion." Did she "understand" as you and I might? Yes? No? Does it matter?

Children and Communion

John joined his parents in making their way to the altar. The five-year-old looked at the basket of bread and asked: "Is this for me?" "Sure," his pastor replied, thinking to herself "we wouldn't sit you down at table, at home, and not give you food."

Families wouldn't think of withholding affection or nourishment from a child because the child could not yet "understand" what it means. From ancient times, the Church has embraced infant children with the gift of Holy Baptism for just that reason. In the same way, the church has learned that it cannot withhold the broken bread of God's love, or the precious blood of Jesus, from its children. We are stewards of those marvellous gifts. Good stewardship involves sharing the richness of those precious gifts with our children.

Jason's Story

Jason was four years old. It was his first communion and everything was ready. Jason's family had just moved into New Hamburg, so he was new to the parish and had not previously partaken of the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

The table had been set. A little procession was forming in the narthex. A big "Come, Walk With Us" banner was hanging in the nave. The Affirmation! Singers were mustering in the Katie Luther Room for that morning's anthem. Kids in the grade three Affirmation! Ministry programme brought the bread they had baked on the previous Friday's "professional development day." A couple of their number would place it carefully on the table at the Offertory. The wine represented the labours of the Klaassen family, a couple who had been making wine for communion for some time.

Upon their arrival at Trinity Church, Jason and his family experienced the centrality of Holy Communion in the life of this community. Jason would watch for "the parade" and listen in wonder to the many voices singing together at the Sunday celebration. When the sermon got a little long, he turned around at his seat, kneeling on the floor, and used his pew as a table to draw some pictures with the crayons he'd gotten on his way in to worship.

When it came time for the offering, Jason was interested to see kids involved in the procession of the gifts. Jason watched with wide eyes as the assisting minister prepared the table and the presiding minister, together with the people, rehearsed the old, old story and began to gather the people to the table. As the pastor offered the bread to him, she said "The body of Christ, given for you, Jason." He eagerly took the bread, as he had been shown, in the "Jesus' cradle" he had created with his overlapping, cupped hands. Then the assisting minister - a neighbour whom he knew from the street where they'd moved - offered him the cup. He helped Jason to take the base of the cup in his own hands while steadying it for him. "The blood of Christ, shed for you," he said.

The holy meal was new to Jason, but, as he took part in the celebration, he felt loved and special and a part of a great, extended family. He didn't understand what it meant... or did he? A little? A lot? Does it matter?

Making All Things New

In 1991, following upon several years of study, prayer and contemplation, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada approved the **Statement on Sacramental Practices**. This document speaks of Holy Communion as the *meal of the baptized-children included!* Wonderful! Slowly, cautiously and carefully, we are coming to reclaim the place of children in the worship life of the whole people of God. Reformer Martin Luther would be proud! For more information, see the **Sacramental Practices Statements** [<http://www.worship.ca/sec3.html#sacprac>] (ELCIC, ELCA, et alia) material in Section 3 of the **Lift Up Your Hearts** web site [<http://www.worship.ca/>].

As mentioned above, Trinity's pastors and Sunday School teachers are working closely together to foster the wholeness of our worshipping community. Our Sunday Church School curriculum - **Whole People of God** - is specifically oriented toward making the connection between our lives as worshippers, our lives as teachers and learners, and our lives as Christians active in the world.

As in Jesus' day, adults in our congregation are asked to accept and welcome the children in our midst, to openly receive the gifts they offer, to visit with them (over coffee and juice between the services), to acknowledge their presence and worth as part of the church of the present, the here-and-now, as well as of the church of the future.