

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Reformed and Always Reforming: Children at the Table
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February 7, 2021

Exodus 12:1-11; 1 Corinthians 11:23-32

Once every quarter it would pass in front of me and I always wanted it. Once a quarter plates of bread and cups of juice would be passed by my parents one to another and then to other adults down the pew. After each quarterly communion service, I would ask my parents why I couldn't have any. They patiently explained to me that I would need to go through a communicants' class to partake. When was that I would ask? They would reply, "When you are in seventh grade." Ultimately, I wore them down and in fifth grade I was allowed into the communicants' class. We had to memorize The Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, the Beatitudes and the first question and answer in the Westminster Confession. Then all of us stood in a line in front of the pastor who had us recite our answers. I managed it all pretty well except the Beatitudes, but I think the pastor thought it was so cute that a fifth grader wanted to be in the class that he let it slide. Then, I was ready. I wish I could tell you that taking communion that next Sunday was a life changing moment...but it wasn't. I suppose because in the end, it was just bread and juice.

The first question before us this morning is, why has the church, and why do most churches, still insist on some sort of communicants' or confirmation class before children can come to the table? Why aren't children welcome all the time? The answer can be found in two places: tradition and scripture. The tradition of only allowing older youth or adults at the table is an ancient one. In the early church, which was continually under threat of persecution, it was important to weed out any spies who might be in the community's midst. The way to do this was to have a three-year process of catechesis, of teaching on the mysteries of the faith before an individual was allowed to partake of the sacred meal. Second, there were Paul's words in his first letter to the church at Corinth. "*Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup.*" The understanding of these words slowly became that to examine one's self was to examine one's self over the meaning and purpose of the meal; that if one didn't understand what one was doing at the table, then one was bringing judgment against one's self. Thus, this interpretation of Paul's words reinforced the tradition that only adults, or adolescents, were capable of understanding communion, so children were not welcome at the table.

This then leads us to our second question of the morning, which is why do we in the Reformed tradition and here at Everybody's Church, not only allow, but invite all children to the table? The answer once again comes from two sources: scripture and tradition. First scripture. We too point to Paul's words from 1 Corinthians as support for a fully inclusive table. We do so because the context of Paul's words was a situation in which the wealthy in the Corinthian

Church were not sharing with the poor in the community. What would happen is that the wealthy would arrive at church early with a picnic lunch and wine, then eat and get drunk. Then when the poor would arrive, they would have nothing. So, when communion came around, the wealthy would still have bread and wine aplenty, but the poor would have nothing for the meal and the wealthy wouldn't share. Thus, only a part of the community could partake in the sacred meal. And while that sort of behavior might be acceptable in Roman society, Paul says it is not acceptable within the Jesus community. Thus, Paul castigates the wealthy for this, telling them that they needed to examine their actions in the light of Christ's love for all.

The tradition portion of the answer is also Biblically based in the Jewish understanding of Passover. As we read this morning, Passover was the meal of remembrance of God's freeing the Israelites from slavery. And the tradition of Passover is that it is a family meal. Passover is not only shared by old and young alike, but children play an essential role in the meal. In fact, it is such a family meal that children ask questions during the meal and receive answers from the adults. In a sense it is real-time catechesis. I would argue that it is this tradition of Passover that would have informed Paul's understanding of communion; that it is a family meal in which men, women and children are all not only welcome, but ought to have a learning place at the table. And for those of you who have joined us since the onset of the pandemic, this is tradition we have here at Everybody's Church, that the children participate at the table, as an integral part of our sacred meal.

One of the ways to understand this meal is through the term, the Eucharist, another name for communion. The meaning of eucharist is "thanksgiving" meaning this is a thanksgiving meal. So for a moment think of a good Thanksgiving meal you have attended...not one in which people fought about politics, but one in which everyone ate and laughed and gave thanks together. At my family Thanksgiving meals there was often a children's table where children were allowed to eat everything the adults ate, without having to explain all the details of the original Thanksgiving feast. All were welcome to eat...and the same is true for us.

This morning then, know that all are welcome at this table. It is a family feast in which Jesus sits at the head and the rest of us gather. It is a family meal in which we learn through participating. It is a family meal in which old and young and in-between are welcome. It is a place where those with questions as well as those with answers are welcome. I hope today you will partake of this family meal, as together we remember the height, depth and breadth of God's love for the world.