

Today we celebrate World Communion Sunday with our Christian brothers and sisters from all over the world. Communion is always a special celebration, but especially today. However, we often approach communion as a duty, something we have to do, something on the Good Christian Checklist. Unfortunately, sometimes it becomes routine and we just go through the motions, take the bread and cup, and never appreciate the significance of this sacrament. If we did, we would be like my grandchildren when they were younger and enjoyed going to Chuckie Cheese, the playground, the park, or their favorite toy store. We would approach the Lord's Table with joy, enthusiasm, and anticipation. So on this World Communion Sunday let's look at communion from the point of view of a child.

During the children's sermon one Sunday morning, the pastor was explaining what communion is all about. He noted that the Bible talks about Holy Communion being a "joyful feast." He went on to explain that joyful means happy; thus a joyful feast is a happy meal. So he asked the kids what was needed for a happy meal. One little boy immediately held his hand up and said: "A hamburger, fries and a coke."

In preparation to come to the Lord's Table this morning from a child's perspective, let's look at a passage from the Bible that provides some insight into how we should approach the love and grace that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ freely offers to each of us. Listen to this story from the tenth chapter of the Gospel of Mark, verses 13 through 16.

Read Mark 10:13-16

This is the beautiful story of Jesus with the children. One of our earliest memories from Sunday School might be the picture of Jesus blessing the little children. Three of the four Gospels record this event. It was natural for Jewish mothers to wish that their children would be blessed by a great and distinguished Rabbi or teacher like Jesus.

What makes this passage even more significant is the fact that Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem; He knew that His destiny with the cross lay ahead of Him. The shadows of the cross had to be on His mind; yet He still took time out to be with the children. Even with such concerns on His mind, Jesus took the children into His arms; He had the heart to smile into their faces and maybe even to play with them for a while. Can't you just visualize the smile on His face as He talked and played with the children; there had to be joy in His heart.

Now this tension might explain why the disciples acted like they did. The parents who brought their children to be blessed by Jesus were shooed away by the disciples. The disciples were not mean, grumpy old men. They simply wanted to protect Jesus. While they really didn't understand what was going on, perhaps they could see and sense the tension and concern in

Jesus' face. They did not want Him to be bothered, nor did they want any additional demands to be placed on Him at this time. They didn't realize that Jesus always wanted to be around children, even at such a time as this. That's why Jesus said: "Let the little children come unto me."

This particular story also gives us some insight into the human side of Jesus. It tells us that He was the kind of person who cared for children and wanted to be around them. From my reading of the New Testament, I don't believe that Jesus was one of these strict, gloomy, and joyless people. You can imagine from His teachings that He was full of life, joyful, humorous, and fun to be around. I believe that He was always smiling, was warm and welcoming, and had a personality that attracted everybody to Him.

This story also points out something that you quickly learn about Jesus as you study the Bible, and that is that He never passed up an opportunity to teach. Whenever anyone asked Him a question or approached Him, Jesus always used the opportunity to teach them, His disciples or the people standing around; to help them grow in their relationship with the Lord. Listen to this teaching point again as found in the paraphrase of this text from the *Message*: "The people brought children to Jesus, hoping He might touch them. The disciples shooed them off. But Jesus was irate and let them know it: 'Don't push these children away. Don't ever get between them and me. These children are at the very center of life in the kingdom. Mark this: unless you accept God's kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you'll never get in.'"

Now what does Jesus mean by the kingdom of God here? Well, that's a subject for a future sermon; we really don't have enough time this morning to adequately address this. But the best explanation that I have found says that "the kingdom of God is a state of society upon earth where God's will is as perfectly done as in heaven." In other words, to enter the kingdom is to accept and do God's will as we just prayed in the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

But in the time, we have this morning I want to focus on the phrase "the simplicity of a child." Jesus indicates that to enter the kingdom of God we must have the attitude and disposition of a little child; in other words, "be a kid again." To truly receive Jesus Christ into our hearts and to experience the grace, forgiveness and love of God as originally intended, there must be childlike qualities in each of us.

So, what are some of these childlike characteristics? There are many, but let me focus on a few that apply to our spiritual growth. The first one that comes to mind is trust. We enter into a personal relationship with the Lord when we reclaim the innocent trust of a child. Think about it, children are dependent on others. They must trust that their parents or grandparents will provide their basic needs such as food, shelter, and health care. And because they know that

they will be taken care of, they don't worry; they enjoy life. I see this everyday as I watch my grandchildren Trevor, Logan and Eleanor grow up.

A major step in our spiritual growth is to ultimately admit that we are not in charge of our life, nor are we in control of our destiny. If you doubt this statement, you will soon find out the hard way as life throws you challenges, unexpected surprises and bad news one after another. Little children depend on their parents for wisdom and care; they trust that their parents will provide what they need. Like children, we are dependent on the love and good graces of our Heavenly Father. Thus, to receive the kingdom of God, to experience His grace, we must recognize this and put our total trust in the Lord and walk in faith.

Now contrary to what you may believe or have experienced, children are normally obedient. However, there are exceptions, because boys will be boys. Take for example two six-year-old boys who were attending a catholic school and constantly getting into trouble. Their teacher tried everything she could to make them behave, but nothing worked. So, she finally sent the boys to see the priest. The first boy went into his office and sat down in chair on the other side of the priest's desk. Then the priest looked straight at him and asked: "Son, do you know where God is?" The little boy just sat there. The priest stood up and raising his voice asked again: "Son, I said do you know where God is?" The little boy started trembling but said nothing. Then the priest leaned over the desk and asked louder a third time: "Son, do you know where God is?"

At this the little boy bolted out of the chair, out of the office and rushed past his friend in the waiting room, ran all the way home, jumped into bed and pulled the covers over his head. His friend followed him home, and went into his bedroom. He asked him what happened. The little boy replied: "God's missing, and they think we did it!"

But the natural instinct of a child is to obey. Believe it or not, most children obey far more often than they disobey. They have not learned the pride, dishonesty, selfish ambitions, and the false independence which often separates us from our fellow human beings and from God. In the same way, as His children, we are called to obey God.

Also, have you ever noticed that children have a short memory. They have not learned how to hold grudges and nurture bitterness like we adults do. Even when they are unjustly treated, they forget, and they forget so completely that they don't even need to forgive. Think how much better our world would be if more of us adopted this childlike quality!

In this story, Jesus lays His hands on the children and blesses them. He shows them love, probably because they unconditionally loved Him in return. They do not complicate matters with rules, regulations and procedures. They believe Jesus' words as He speaks them. It is as if Jesus looks at the children and sighs: "Finally, someone who understands; finally, somebody

who gets it!" Many of us are guilty of approaching the church, religion, God and Jesus with doubts, suspicion, looking for strings attached, or debating minor issues on doctrine.

A few weeks ago, I mentioned a great theologian who was asked him what was the greatest concept that he had learned over his years in ministry. His answer was a simple song that you and I learned years ago in Sunday School: "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so." It's that simple; unfortunately, we as adults overly analyze and complicate our relationship with the Lord. We need to be child-like again!

In this story, Jesus is telling us that the kingdom of God belongs to those who, like children, are prepared to receive it as a gift from God, freely given. Children have an openness and receptivity that we adults have lost. Watch children when you give them a present; they smile; they are genuinely excited. They don't ask what strings are attached or what commitment they have to make to earn the gift. They accept it freely just as God's grace is freely given to us. God offers each of His grace, His love and the opportunity for a personal relationship with Him as a gift; we cannot earn it; we must accept it as a child.

One of the most visible signs of God's grace being extended to us is when we partake in Holy Communion. Unfortunately, many of us approach communion as we approach God, like a final exam - with reluctance, with possible fear of what may be expected of us, with some guilt for lack of preparation, with feelings of being unworthy to participate, when in reality we should approach the Lord's Table with joy, anticipation, thanksgiving, and enthusiasm.

Now one of the best examples of approaching the Lord's Table with joy happened while I was in Grants. One of our faithful members had fought a long-term battle with diabetes that resulted in the loss of her eyesight and eventually her death. Barbara had a seeing eye dog named Panama who came to church with her every Sunday. After Barbara's death, her husband John was allowed to keep Panama. One Christmas Eve I was serving communion and the people were coming down the center aisle to receive the elements. I looked up and here came John down the aisle with Panama beside him with her tail wagging from side to side. I thought now that's how we should receive communion and God's grace with our tails wagging from side to side, excited at the opportunity to celebrate God's love and grace for each one of us, and thankful for the opportunity to grow in our personal relationship with Him.

On this World Communion Sunday, as we prepare to receive communion this morning, let the child in you bring you closer to God as never before. Be a kid again and experience God's love and grace as never before! Amen.