

“Do this in remembrance of me.”

HISTORY - It has been fascinating for me to look back into the history of our congregation as part of our 125th Anniversary. First Lutheran has a history of innovation. One of the ways this congregation has exemplified the willingness to be innovative is in our sacramental practices, particularly with regard to Holy Communion. Under Pastor’s Gullixson and Ulvilden, in the first half of the 20th century, the practice of registering for communion individually and participating in private confession before taking Holy Communion was re-instituted after a long absence.

During the ministry of Pastor Kildahl, in the 1950’s, the frequency of communion in worship was increased, so that we were communing once a month in what became known as “sacramental Sunday.” By the 1960’s, the congregation began offering communion once a week in at least one of our services. In 1965, Pastor Kildahl wrote, *“Here we believe the sacrament is a vital and spiritually enriching gift of God for his people, and therefore offer our people the sacrament weekly and often...we rejoice in the many who do take the sacrament, but we hope and pray that the spiritual health of our members may be strengthened by frequent communing.”*

In the 1970’s however, came a “big change.” In his annual report that year, Pastor Kildahl wrote, *“That the church has taken action to begin the administration of the Sacrament of Holy Communion to children in the fifth grade and before confirmation.”* By the late 1970’s, under Pastor Davick, the Lord’s supper became even more frequent. It was offered in all services every week...it was at the time considered a giant step. Along with this change in frequency came the practice of inviting all children regardless of age to come forward with their parents and older siblings, *“though only for a blessing.”* Yet by 1985, it was reported *“that bread is given to everyone, even to infants.”* This is where First Lutheran experienced controversy.

It was argued by proponents of this practice that when Jesus said, *“Bring the children to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the Kingdom of God,”* it meant that we should bring even infants to receive Christ, and in the sacrament of Holy Communion we do just that...receive Christ. *“This is my body...this is my blood,”* Jesus said, and in our Lutheran tradition that is what we confess...that *“Christ is present in this sacrament.”* Others contended that the words of Paul in I Corinthians 11 were to inform our practices with regard to Holy Communion. Paul had instructed that before communing, *“We are to examine ourselves, so as not to eat and drink unworthily.”* Since it is said that infants cannot do this, they should wait to commune. This was the contention of those who opposed giving bread to younger children.

CURRENT FLC PRACTICE - Here, at least in practice, is pretty much where First Lutheran has left things. We as a congregation welcome all forward at communion time, and have also continued offering bread to any child that asks for it, regardless of age. Formal teaching about the sacrament has waited until the fifth grade. In the fall of 2006 however, our church council approved a policy whereby we would invite parents more intentionally into the decision about the communion practices of their children. If they so chose, their children could take both the bread and wine of communion at an age younger than 5th grade. In effect, this decision formally recognized what had been in practice for over 20 years, that is, children of any age were given Holy Communion. That they might take only bread and not wine does not change the fact that they have communed. The bread is 100% of Jesus in communion, just as the wine is 100% Jesus. We cannot “divide Jesus up” in the sacrament into halves. Communion is not the body and blood of Jesus because someone understands or fails to understand this mystery. Communion is the body and blood of Jesus because Jesus says it is. In other words, we Lutherans take literally Jesus own words *“this is my body...this is my blood.”* And so “it is.”

Clearly not all parents in our congregations are aware of or in agreement with this policy. As your pastor, just as in the wider church, I recognize the varying positions taken about Holy Communion. Many congregations and parents want a “faith milestone” moment in their children’s life. Though an arbitrary determination, fifth grade has seemed like a good time for our children to have this particular milestone.

In truth faith milestones are good things, as “rites of passage” tend to be going by the wayside in our culture as kids “grow up faster and faster all the time.”

ELCA GUIDANCE - But it’s important to remember “there is no command from our Lord regarding the age at which people should be baptized or first communed” (*ELCA statement on “The Use of the Means of Grace” – p. 43*). We are encouraged by this statement to avoid practices that make communion effective “*by its mere performance - without faith*” or narrowing faith to “*the intellectual understanding of Christ’s presence and gifts.*” Therefore, the statement of the ELCA encourages *congregations* to adopt its communion policies after conversation, study and prayer, and continually check them against biblical and confessional guides. It encourages age appropriate instruction precede or accompany the receiving of communion. Parents should not begin allowing their child to commune without seeking instruction for themselves and their child, in consultation with the pastor. But the statement clearly states that these individual decisions on the age to begin communion should be done with respect to the adopted practice of the congregation. Again, we did adopt the practice of welcoming children younger than fifth grade to commune back in 2006. Perhaps this was not done with the understanding or participation of all concerned members, although attempts were made to publicize open meetings and include all who were interested.

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE - As your pastor, I have observed varying practices among parents with regard to their children. With our instructions about communion each week along with our attempt to make sure our communion servers do not offer bread without a child first extending their hands, it seems that aspect of our practice is going well. As one who usually distributes wine each week however, I see very few children under the age of fifth grade taking the wine. Yes, it happens occasionally, but it is still quite rare.

Does this suggest confusion about whether younger children should take wine? Quite possibly. Does this suggest a desire to re-think our 2006 decision to commune those younger than fifth grade? Again, this is possible. Could it suggest that we are slowing “*growing into this new practice*” and it will take time for us find ways to appropriately include and instruct children of varying ages? Again, this is possible.

To respect the decisions of parents and baptismal sponsors who desire later communion, we will continue to offer formal instruction for children in the fifth grade. But we will also be more deliberate about offering parents of infants and younger children who desire “earlier communion” appropriate instruction so that they can make the decision to begin to commune with their children before that age. Within our congregation’s overall policy, this instruction can be done in our baptism and new member classes, during children’s sermons on Sundays, as well as more frequent communication through our parish education program. If you wish to teach more at home about this in preparation for including children in Holy Communion please contact me for materials.

RENEWED INVITATION – One further note - Holy Communion was “instituted by Christ” on that day we call Maundy Thursday of Holy Week. It is one of the most beautiful and moving services of the church year. In recent years, children have received their “first communion” on that night, and it was preceded by a special Passover supper in the parish hall. This year, we will move the Passover supper re-enactment into the worship service itself. Many of our fifth grade kids will be receiving communion for the first time that night. But I urge you to avail yourself of this beautiful worship service even if you don’t have a child involved. Maundy Thursday is the first communion night of the whole church, and a vital part of Holy Week worship and observance. I long to see us recapture that by having the whole worshipping community present. Do plan to attend this year’s service, made all the more special by those young members who will join you in communion for the very first time.

Because of a cross,
Ken Nelson
Senior Pastor