



## **Jesus Loves Me: The Young Child and Communion**

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This booklet was originally printed as apart of the “Let the Children Come Series” by Round Table Resources, through the Connecticut Conference, United Church of Christ, in 1992. The three titles have been popular through the years, and nearly all the print copies have been sold. But we still receive requests for the booklets, sometimes from places far away. So we are now making the booklets available through the Connecticut Conference website in the hopes that more people can have access to these useful resources.

The three titles in the series are:

For children and parents: *Communion With Your Child*

For families and church school: *Do This to Remember Me*

For Pastors and Church Educators: *Jesus Loves Me: The Young Child and Communion*

Once I heard a story that, when asked to give a summary of his theology, Karl Barth replied, “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” Barth reduced his complex theological system to this simple line from a song that most Christian children sing in church school. What this says to me is that ultimately all Christian theology is based on faith in the love of God as communicated to us in the Scriptures through the story of God’s activities with the people of Israel which culminate in

the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, whom we call the Christ.

My earliest recollection of this kind of faith occurred before I was six years old. I attended church school sporadically. It was a scary place for me, full of strangers. After church school my grandmother would come for me and we would attend church together. Sitting in the sanctuary, I nestled against her side and contemplated the stained glass image of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane which hung above the altar of our Methodist church. I'd sung the song about Jesus, so I believed that Jesus loved me. I'd heard the stories and had grown to love him in return. I hated the ending of the story though. I always hoped that someone would change it. He died. It was sad. Then one Sunday the ending did change. As we sat together I heard the minister say, "Take and eat. This is my body broken for you." Then Grandma gave me a small piece of sweet bread. A moment later I heard, "This is my blood, shed for you. Take. Drink. Do this in remembrance of me."

Then I drank a small cup of grape juice along with all the other people in church. Somehow I felt that Jesus was OK and everything was alright. Somehow he was still alive as long as I remembered him. I sensed that what we did with the bread and juice was somehow important and mysterious.

Later I discovered that my experience was not unique. In his book, *The Original Vision*, Edward Robinson states the "children can do have profound, mature religious experiences which only in later life can be named, described, explained, or comprehended. Just as religion is danced [or sung] before it is believed, it is experienced before it is explained."<sup>i</sup>

Many years later when I had children of my own, I became a Christian Educator in the United Church of Christ. I began to reflect on experiences in UCC churches in light of what I had studied about faith development and human development. In many churches the adults worshiped while the children went to church school. I felt that this was somehow incomplete. I began to work with the pastor of my church to create opportunities for the children to be present in worship and for the adults to continue in their education. I knew it was important for all ages to be engaged in both activities.

One Sunday, as the Communion elements were being distributed, I watched a young girl, a seventh grader, follow the elements hungrily with her eyes. She watched as the bread and juice were passed along the row to her father and others by her mother, a Deacon. She watched, saddened, as they passed her by. I realized then that children needed more than being present in worship. They needed to participate, to belong.

When I spoke to other educators and pastors about the need to include young children at the Communion table, I found a wide variety of opinions and practices. Some readily admitted young children, even

infants, to the Sacrament while others flatly rejected Communion for pre-Confirmation children. I discovered that this was an issue around which there were strong opinions and heated debate. It was felt to be a divisive issue within some congregations, while in others it was accepted as a matter of course. A few pastors felt that it didn't even need to be discussed since there were two thousand years of tradition to support the practice of delaying participation until the teenage years and Confirmation. Yet the UCC Book of Worship encourages our congregations to study the admission of children to the Table highlighting recent discoveries made in Biblical criticism and ecumenical discussions around the Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry Document.

The UCC also publishes several resources to aid congregations in study and education to this end. Most recently, the Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ has followed the Penn Northeast Conference in passing a resolution to encourage churches to do so.

It has been several years since my initial encounter with the issue of children's participation at the Lord's Supper. During that time I have struggled to find satisfactory answers to the questions surrounding this debate. It is my hope that this paper, which shares some of the results of my struggles, will contribute to the discussions that churches within the UCC continue to have on this question and that someday our motto which proclaims "that they may all be one" will include the youngest of those among us at the Lord's Table in all of our churches.

Scripture gives us four accounts of the Lord's Supper in the New Testament (Mt.26:26-29; Mk.14:22-25; Lk.22:15-20; and I Cor.11:23-25). Yet there are other New Testament texts which illuminate the more general concept of feeding and table fellowship. In the Gospels we see Jesus eating with tax collectors and others who are called sinners; Jesus is seen feeding the multitudes; Jesus appeared to his disciples after the crucifixion and fed them; Jesus characterized himself as the bread, water and wine. Jesus tells parables of banquets and feasts; he changes water to wine; he speaks of abundant grain, living water, fermenting yeast and new wine. As we look at these images of food and feeding we can begin to see that they are central to Jesus' concept of ministry. To him, and to the Hebrew people in general, there was no body, mind, spirit split. To feed or be fed, whether physically or spiritually, affects the whole person. Jesus came to feed the hungry, the outcast, the sinner. In many ways he images God for us as the One Who Nourishes.

All three of the synoptic gospel accounts place Jesus' last meal in the context of the Passover. Jesus was true to his Hebrew heritage in which stories of food and meals also play an important part. In her plenary address to the Craigville IV Colloquy on Communion in 1987, Anne K. Fries reminds us of the stories and images of food and meals in the First Testament:

*Our hindsight needs to extend through all Hebrew history, from our wandering Aramean patriarchs whose table became sacred when it hosted three angels...to the relationships inherent in manna, shewbread, the cereal and blood sacrifices on the holy altar, the ritual blessing and breaking of bread as each meal began, and the blessing and sharing of the cup at the close in remembrance of God's faithfulness to God's chosen people.<sup>ii</sup>*

Fries goes on to remind us that as Jesus' disciples were accustomed to gather in fellowship with him and with each other to share bread, blessing and belonging as part of the Hebrew community, so too did the early church in celebration of the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Church came into being around this central act of celebration. It became the "source and expression of identity for the gathered believers."<sup>iii</sup> Table fellowship, Eucharist, was both physical and spiritual sustenance to these early Christians who lived with the threat of persecution, with hope and in expectation of the coming of their risen Lord.

Yet, Rev. Allen Happe tells us that even at this early time of the church there was no universal agreement in "worship, leadership, customs or understanding. The Church of Christ was from the Apostolic Age until at least the fourth century essentially congregational." There seems to have been no time in the church when all groups believed or acted in harmony with one another. Practice differed from community to community in the way their life, worship, behavior, and theology was lived out and expressed. But the gospel "reveals certain general universal imperatives for those who would believe in Jesus and follow him: acceptance of children into the company of Jesus, including women within the 'theological circle', praying for enemies, mutual forgiveness, feeding the hungry, loving God and neighbor, etc."<sup>iv</sup>

So just who are these followers and believers of Jesus? When may they participate in the fellowship of the table? In First Corinthians Paul rebukes the Christians in Corinth for following after various teachers rather than following Christ. Their factionalism resulted in abuses at the Table. He displays his frustration with them by saying, "I am thankful that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius..." (I Cor.1:10ff.) Later he re-instructs them on proper table etiquette (1Cor.11:17ff.) so that they will not continue to bring shame on the community and on Christ. He compares them to those who are unbaptized, those who eat at the "table of demons" (ICor.12:21). So for Paul baptism is the mark of the believer and follower of Christ. It is the baptized who are permitted to eat at the Lord's Table, even if they do not yet completely understand what it means to do so. It is clear that Paul sees Christian life as a process of growth from childlike faith to maturity in Christ. One begins with milk and moves on, as one is able, to solid foods. Throughout, they are invited to Christ's meal.

The second century document, the Didache, supports the idea of all baptized believers partaking of the Lord's Supper. It says, "But let no one eat or drink of the Eucharist with you except those baptized in the name of the Lord, for it was in reference to this that the Lord said: 'Do not give that which is holy to dogs.'"<sup>v</sup>

Research done by Rev. Robert E. Carter supports this:

*There is clear and convincing evidence that infants were admitted to the Lord's Supper in the Western church from about 200 A.D. to 1200 A.D. and that the practice continued until a much later date in certain places. Evidence for this is found in 'The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus' (215 A.D.) and in the writings of Cyprian (mid third century). Augustine believed that 'infants must feed on Christ.' The practice of infant Communion continued over the years as a universal practice. It died away as the cup was denied the laity and with the growth of the doctrine of transubstantiation. It was not expressly forbidden in the Roman Catholic Church until the council of Trent in 1562.*<sup>vi</sup>

Protestant Reformed John Calvin expresses another viewpoint. He was vehemently opposed to Infant Communion. It is his view that seems to have been reflected in many mainline Protestant churches until recent years. In his famous Institutes he states:

*For with respect to baptism the Lord sets no definite age. But he does not similarly hold forth the supper for all to partake of, but only for those who are capable of discerning the body and blood of the Lord, of examining their own conscience, of proclaiming the Lord's death, and of considering its power. Do we wish anything plainer than the Apostle's teaching when he exhorts each [one] to prove and search [him/herself], then to eat of this bread and drink of this cup (1Cor. 11:28)? A self examination ought to come first and it is vain to expect this of infants.*<sup>vii</sup>

Calvin bases his opposition to infants receiving Communion on Paul's admonition to the church in Corinth to which I referred earlier. Paul's admonition to "discern the body" has suffered from misinterpretation over the years. Modern Biblical scholarship recognizes in Paul's words "not a concern for a cognitive understanding of sacramental presence but a concern for and experience of the body of Christ present in the community of faith that Christ gathers as the church."<sup>viii</sup> What Paul wants us to see in the Eucharist is that it is a family meal. We are Christ's body, those of us who eat together are the sons and daughters of God, members of God's family.

New England Puritans, following Calvin, required evidence of conversion or regeneration before allowing believers to participate in the Lord's Supper. While infants of believers were baptized, they were not

allowed to participate in Communion. This practice resulted in what was known as the Halfway Covenant.<sup>ix</sup> But even in this tradition, the issue was far from settled. Ambivalence can be seen in the minutes from the meeting of the Connecticut State General Association of the Congregational Churches held in New Haven, CT on September 9, 1788:

*The following questions were read and voted to be offered to each particular Association for discussion viz:*

*1<sup>st</sup> – Is it an Institution of the Gospel that baptized children, as soon as they are capable of eating and behaving with decency should partake of the Lord’s Supper?*

*2<sup>nd</sup> – Are there any absolute promises of either temporal or spiritual good, made in Scripture to the children of believers?*

One person in the Reform tradition who was in favor of infant Communion was the Reverend James Pierce, an ordained Presbyterian minister whose parents were members of the Congregational Church in Stepney, England. In 1728, Mr. Pierce published “An Essay in Favor of the Ancient Practice of Giving the Eucharist to Children.” The reasoning in his 183 page essay is summed up by this syllogism:

*Whatever ought to be received by all members of the visible church, ought to be received by infants. The eucharistical bread ought to be received by all members of the visible church. Therefore the eucharistical bread ought to be received by baptized infants.*

The major [proposition] in this syllogism is certain, supposing infants have a right to baptism. For by their baptism they are entered into the church, and made members of that body. “For by one spirit are we all baptized into one body.” (I Cor. 12:13)

*The minor proposition therefore needs to be proved. And I prove it thus: ‘That bread, the partaking of which signifies and evidences all the members of the visible church to be but one body, ought to be received by all members of the visible church.*

*The eucharistical bread is that bread, the partaking of which signifies and evidences all the members of the visible church to be but one body.*

*Therefore the eucharistical bread ought to be received by all the members of the visible church.<sup>x</sup>*

The Evangelical and Reform tradition, which also contributes to today’s United Church of Christ, followed this same exclusivistic trend. Yet, while calling infant Communion “an excess” of the early church, John Williamson Nevin, an influential minister in the Mercersburg tradition of the E & R church, went on to write,

*After all, even infant Communion properly set aside as it has been by the Christian world, is far nearer to the first life of Christianity, and less revolting to the sensibilities of sound church faith, than the error which will not suffer infants to come to Christ in the church at all, but by refusing them the sacrament of holy baptism virtually places that whole age, by physical calamity beyond the pale of redemption.*

*(Mercersberg Review, May 1850, p. 254.)<sup>xi</sup>*

At the same time, Hartford's own Congregational theologian and Christian Educator, Horace Bushnell, wrote on Communion for children in his foundational book *Christian Nurture*,

*I see no objection whatever to his [sic] being taken to the supper casually, whenever his childish piety really and seriously desires it; unless some opposing scruples in the church, or the minister, should make it unadvisable. Christ, I am sure would say – "Suffer the child and forbid him not." (p.363, Centenary Edition).<sup>xii</sup>*

This brief survey of children's participation in the Lord's Supper reflects the ambiguity of Protestant thought on the matter. The tradition is far from universal. Despite the intellectually oriented, enlightenment view of the Reformers, which shapes much of the UCC's tradition of withholding Communion from pre-Confirmation children until they have an understanding of it, the practice has not gone unquestioned or unchallenged. One tradition, that of the Eastern Orthodox Church, while lying outside of Protestant tradition, has practiced infant Communion unabated from Christianity's earliest days. It appears to me that it is a question of which tradition is referred to when we discuss "Tradition" surrounding children's participation in the Lord's Supper. As I have shown, even among our Congregational and E and R roots, the question has never been resolved. Our forebears were never entirely at ease in denying their children the Sacrament.

The focus of this discussion is the United Church of Christ. It is pertinent then to turn to its current understanding of this matter. This understanding is reflected in two publications. First, the *Book of Worship of the United Church of Christ* describes the understanding of Communion in the context of a Service of Word and Sacrament,

*The invitation and the call to the supper emphasize that all people of faith are welcome at Christ's Table. The invitation and the call celebrate not only the memory of a meal that is past, but an actual meal with the risen Christ that is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet at which Christ will preside at the end of history. The visible breaking of the bread and pouring of the wine are symbolic*

*actions with double significance. The wheat that is gathered to make one loaf and the grapes that are pressed to make one cup remind participants that they are one in the body of Christ, the church. But the breaking and the pouring also announce the costliness of Christ's sacrificial life and of the discipleship to which we are called.<sup>xiii</sup>*

Second, The Leader's Box, [OCLL, 1982] elaborates upon the meaning of Communion in the following way,

*Communion is:*

- *the way in which the living presence of Christ is experienced in the church...*
- *the way we acknowledge and celebrate our faith that God was in Christ reconciling the world and bring in the new age...*
- *the experience of how the world ought to be and how it will be when God's reign comes...*
- *a setting in which we confess our sins and receive the good news that we have already been forgiven...*
- *the gathering in which the church is sustained and nurtured for faithfulness and ministry...*
- *a message about the sacredness of all life and of the creation...*
- *the means by which we proclaim our hope in the realm or kingdom of God...*
- *a means of uniting us not only with Christ but also with one another...*
- *a personal, but not private experience.<sup>xiv</sup>*

In looking at just these two resources of several published by the UCC we can see that the sacrament is meant for all people of faith. We can also see that it is full of many levels of meaning. As we look at these levels of meaning, which are by no means an exhaustive list, we are presented with a variety of ways to dialogue with this outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, or Sacrament. As adults, we struggle with how to approach this activity of Communion with its multi-faceted nature. How then can children even begin to enter into an understanding of Communion before the onset of rational thought, which is commonly agreed on as beginning around the age of puberty or the time of Confirmation in the UCC? For me, the developmental theories of Erikson, Piaget, Kohlberg, and Fowler shed light on this question.

In infancy, a child learns primarily through the senses. The child has two primary reflexes, sucking and grasping. The attitudes of trust and mistrust are the predominant one's in the infant's world view. As a child experiences the world via taste and touch, as needs are met, or not met by the mother, or other primary caretaker in providing food and



comfort, the child identifies the world as basically trustworthy or not. The infant's faith, or attitude toward life, is through inference. Those who care for the infant communicate the assurance of meaning and purpose in life in non-verbal ways. As the infant learns how to receive comfort and nourishment, it also develops the bases for becoming one who is able to give. In this earliest, trusting encounter between mother and child a sense of the holy is experienced. It is through this primary relationship that a capacity for faith develops which overcomes the initial experience of separation at birth with its feelings of dread and terror.

William O. Roberts tells us that this initial separation at birth can also be termed a crisis. He goes on to say that this word, crisis, comes from the Greek word *KRISIS*, which means decision. The decision of birth is a decision of life or death. A threshold is crossed by the infant from the familiarity and comfort of the womb to the unfamiliarity of the world. The journey of life has begun. This beginning is marked in the Christian community by the Sacrament of Baptism. It is a rebirth into Christ's community. Christ becomes our spiritual parent, from then on he feeds us and nurtures us along the way and over the many thresholds of our lives on the earth until we cross the final threshold into eternal life.<sup>xv</sup>

In light of the above theory how might a baptized infant participate in Communion and at some level understand it? One meaning of Communion in the Leader's Box is "the gathering in which the church is sustained and nurtured for faithfulness and ministry." In participating in the experience of being fed within the context of Christian community, the child will develop a sense of the trustworthiness of the community of believers and its message of acceptance and love. The infant will experience the church as a place of safety, comfort and nourishment in the physical sense. The infant will experience the church as a place where it receives, and consequently, as a place to which it can give. In learning to trust in the context of the Communion Table the infant will acquire an emergent faith and begin to have hope in the kingdom of God even at this precognitive, pre-verbal place in its life.

Between the ages of roughly two and six, young children begin to express themselves and their experience through language. The young child begins to know the difference between self and others, but still possesses an egocentric outlook on life. What the young child doesn't yet know as a result of its limited experience of the world is readily supplemented by an active imagination. At this time children are also grappling with a sense of autonomy, of being a worth individual, versus being an unworthy person filled with shame and doubt about him/herself. That is to say, the young child is able to exert control and authority over its bodily functions and activity. They walk. They are toilet-trained. They discover that they can choose as an act of personal will. Yet they also discover that they are small in size compared to others and are aware, or shamed, by their shortcomings and failures. A

successful negotiation of these early years leaves a child with a sense of self-control and self-esteem resulting in a sense of free will or autonomy.

Older children in this age grouping also encounter the additional task of responding to the world through their own initiative or withdrawing from it due to a sense of guilt. As they continue to develop both bodily and linguistically, moving around in an ever expanding environment and questioning their experience of it, the imagination grows so that children at this age cannot avoid being frightened by what they dreamed and thought up. Through this process the conscience is awakened and early stirrings of moral thinking appear. This early morality is based on anticipated reward or punishment from an exterior source. In order to safely negotiate this world fraught with authorities, the child begins to see itself in terms of others. The child will model its actions and feelings in terms of those around it. What a child knows at this point, is the same as what it feels. As a result, there is little separation of fact from fantasy in the imagination of the child.

Looking again at the meaning of the experience of Communion for the young child, we can see how young children use their imagination and intuitive experience of the holy to enter into ideas of what the Leader's Box calls "how the world ought to be and how it will be when the reign of God comes." We can appreciate how a young child, who is just discovering his/her conscience can begin "to confess his/her sense of sin and receive the good news of forgiveness." Although they probably won't be able to verbalize it, the egocentricity of the child can appreciate the "personal experience" of joining with an imitating parents and other significant adults in this meaningful celebration. A child at this age will also gain in self-esteem and self-worth by being included in the larger community of faith.

Older children, those from approximately seven to twelve years of age, begin to classify objects and to construct an orderly and predictable reality. The child realizes differences in point-of-view between itself and other people. The child has the desire and ability to learn avidly and quickly and loves to engage in planning and making things with one another and with adults. The wider world becomes very important to children of this age because they begin to see themselves as preparing to enter it. As children begin to engage with others, they discover that there are needs and interests outside their own which must be taken into account. The beginning of a sense of justice and fair play starts to develop. Rules for behavior take on a new importance. As the child organizes reality and begins to relate to others in increasingly complex ways, fact and fantasy diverge. It is here that the child will turn toward a recognized and trusted authority for verification. Stories of faith become important so that the child can deal with origins and why things happen the way they do, which are outside of their scope of logic. The child believes and obeys the "rules" of the story without reflection on its deeper meaning. Concepts and symbols in the stories are concrete and one

dimensional, yet the child is able to distinguish between the natural and supernatural. God is conceived in terms of the known and is thought of in anthropomorphic ways. It is with this human figured God that the child of this age begins to relate.

What does Communion mean for the seven to twelve year old age group? They have the ability to appropriate the Sacrament as part of the Story and ritual of the church. The child is familiar with and anxious to accept the validity of the stories of the Bible and Jesus Christ. The child looks to the authority of the church to validate their truth. Children of this age are able to participate in their faith and to learn its precepts and rules of behavior. They are able to begin to see the analogy between Christ and the church as his body and to, in the words of the Leader's Box, "acknowledge and celebrate the faith that God was in Christ reconciling the world and bringing in the new age." It is for these reasons that many denominations see this as the most appropriate age for Confirmation.

This look at ways in which young children can understand and appropriate Communion shows that even before they reach Confirmation age, they are able to participate and interpret the experience in vitally important ways. The developmentalists show us that all learning is not accomplished through catachesis and intellectual reasoning. Rather much of it takes place through formation, or the experience of life with the Christian community. I have discovered that Baptism and participation in Communion form an on-going rite of passage across the threshold of birth from non-being to being to New Being in Christ. In Communion, at any age, we experience the foretaste of that newness, the wholeness that will be ours. This early experience grows and deepens as we mature, but it begins as our life's journey begins, with birth.

We have seen that birth is the beginning of our life journey. Our Baptism which in the UCC generally occurs soon after birth, marks our rebirth into Christian community. Christian formation begins then with our first taste from Christ's Table. The developmentalists have shown that children do belong in worship and at the Lord's Table. Children can trust. They can "Taste and see that the Lord is good. (Ps 34:38)" Children can understand myth or story. They can sing, dance and play before God with unabashed enthusiasm (which means, in God). Jesus himself said that unless people become like little children they will not be part of God's realm.

Religious education professor Gabriel Moran makes the important point that:

*We have set adult learning and education over against childhood learning and education. Children are described as non-rational, non-productive, and dependent: adults as rational, productive and independent. Since children do not think intellectually (abstractly), they do not think. Since they do not know rationally, they do not*

*know. Their subjective experiences and intuitive ways of knowing are deprecated, the ability to perceive and understand the real world is questioned. But...maturity is the integration of these opposites. To be mature is to have fully integrated our non-rational (intuitive) and rational (intellectual) capacities, our non-productive (contemplative) and productive (active) natures, our dependent and independent modes of behavior into interdependency.<sup>xvi</sup>*

We need children and the gifts that they bring us to become mature people. Just as we minister to them in so many ways, so too do they minister to us. We need each other in all the places of our Christian lives together to be a whole, and holy people, a truly inclusive community. Just as we teach them, so too can they teach us. Dennis C. Benson and Stan J. Stewart tell us that children teach us through their ability to change hostility to hospitality by virtue of the unconditional acceptance of us. They can lead us to wonder and awe as they experience the events of life for the first time. Children teach us about healing, reconciliation and forgiveness as they hug, snuggle and squirm at our side in the pews. Babies bring us the gift of God's Holy Spirit as they bring tenderness and joy to our congregations. Children become "God's Doctors" as they make us laugh, for laughter is the medicine of the soul. Children are "Christbearers," courageous apostles, and sinners. Children see visions, suffer, confront, challenge and reach out, They gather the extended faith family at Baptism and make us acknowledge our responsibility. They allow us to return to our own childhood with new insights. Children need us to help them express these qualities. We need children in order to become whole, because children come to us "red hot from the heart of God."<sup>xvii</sup> John Westerhoff calls this mutual enrichment in the faith "enculturation."<sup>xviii</sup> It emphasizes what one person has to bring to another in a dialogical relationship between equals. In another place Westerhoff goes on to say that the primary duty of the faith community is worship: baptizing, praying and making Eucharist. He also says that children belong there, in our midst.<sup>xix</sup>

Educators David Ng and Virginia Thomas agree with Westerhoff. They inform us that when children are welcomed to the Communion table that we are able to witness to God's act of grace through the sacrament for us all. They describe sacraments as "pictures, drawn by God for our edification and nurture" to which children are irresistibly drawn. The act of including children at the Table requires us to trust in God's mercy, not to explain how it operates. In "turning the tables" and allowing the children to partake of Communion, we allow the church to learn this important, and often forgotten, fact in our relationship with God. "We are prevented from agnostic practice of our religion" which assumes that there is special knowledge to be learned before we can be saved. Ng and Thomas further remind us that we do not "observe" sacraments, we "celebrate" them, and children are good at celebrating.<sup>xx</sup>

Those of us who are members of the United Church of Christ consider ourselves to be a pilgrim people. We are, in part, spiritual descendants of those Pilgrims who came to the New World seeking freedom from the bondage of restrictive religious practices. We celebrate this heritage in the title of our [former] hymnal, *The Pilgrim Hymnal*; in the names of our youth groups as Pilgrim Fellowships; and in our denomination's publishing company, The Pilgrim Press.

Theologically, the designation of "pilgrim" extends much deeper into the roots of our faith, to its very beginnings in the Exodus tradition of the Hebrew people. They too were exiles seeking the Promised Land where they could worship God in freedom. The journey through the wilderness was a rebirth through the waters of the Red Sea into a strange and unfamiliar land. They were dependent upon the God of the Covenant for food, water, guidance, and even for life itself. When they crossed the threshold into the Promised Land, God continued to instruct, protect, and chasten these often wayward children. In the beginning they could only celebrate and praise their gracious Creator and Liberator. Later, as they grew older and wiser, they organized their society around what they perceived to be God's laws, often imitating what they saw and experienced in the lands they inhabited. The prophets called them back to earlier, more childlike ways, by rebuking their intellectual and self-justifying excesses and seeking to instill a balance in their behavior through laws written on their hearts.

In many ways this story of the ancestors of our faith is reflected in our journey through life. In his poem "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," Williams Wordsworth wrote that we are born into this world "trailing clouds of glory." We live out our life spans as Christians struggling to remember who we are as God's beloved children, before returning to the promised realm of our Creator. We cross the sea of birth and are welcomed through baptism into the family of God. I believe that it is appropriate that we begin this journey through the wilderness of life at the Table of the One who called himself "the Way, the Truth, and the Life," receiving the living water and the bread of life. It is right that we begin with food for the body and spirit as we grow in wisdom and in stature. As a little child's body is nourished, it receives the teachings and examples of faithful living from other pilgrims who are on the journey. Like the pilgrims on the Emmaus road, we may not recognize Christ who teaches us unless we stop and break bread with him.

If we begin to respect children as fellow pilgrims on the journey, as members of the Body of Christ, others will do so as well. We in the church are a family, and who would invite a family to dinner and not serve the children? Certainly not Jesus, for even the very young know that "Jesus Loves Me." Of all denominations the United Church of Christ can understand this most of all, for our motto is one of inclusiveness. We declare that we exist so that "They May All Be One." If we believe

that, then even the least [youngest] of us belong at Christ's Table. May it be so.

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