



“Let the Children Come to Me”

A curriculum for Holy Communion for Households with PRE-READERS

...[T]he disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”² He called a child, whom he put among them,³ and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.⁴ Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.⁵ Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

⁶ “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.⁷ Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes!” **(Matthew 18:1-7).**

¹³ One day some parents brought their children to Jesus so he could lay his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples scolded the parents for bothering him.

¹⁴ But Jesus said, “Let the children come to me. Don’t stop them! For the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those who are like these children.”¹⁵ And he placed his hands on their heads and blessed them before he left. **(Matthew 19:13-15).**

South Santiago Lutheran Church

Our Mission:

“Teaching the Word. Reaching the World”

We will pursue our mission in this way:

- We are a congregation whose core values seek changed lives through the power of the Holy Spirit by forming and sustaining life-long personal faith in God through Christ Jesus.
- We implement this by engaging in cross-generational ministry and radical hospitality as it is revealed by God’s Word, connecting to others within our congregation, our community and the world.

1. Introduction—The Christian experience of when to instruct for Holy Communion runs completely across the possibilities of child development. Many in our Lutheran tradition (ELCA and its predecessor bodies) were instructed in the 5th grade. Some Lutherans have waited until confirmation, so they were not instructed until 7th, 8th, or even 9th grade. If you grew up Roman Catholic, it is likely you were instructed in 2nd grade. Eastern Orthodox Christians commune their children when they are baptized

as infants.

(Relatedly, when it comes to Baptism, we make no sort of instructional demands upon nor expect any “understanding” from the child being baptized in order to receive the promises of God through water and the Word. One might ask the question then, “How is Holy Communion any different?”)

In the opening Bible verses to this booklet, of course, there is no age limitation given, nor expectation for understanding who or what Jesus is when he speaks about children and faith. In fact, he says to the adults in his midst, “...*Unless YOU change and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven*” (Matt. 18:3). This is not necessarily a matter of eternal judgment as it is a warning not to miss the in-breaking of God’s love to our world in the here and now. Jesus’ words could be understood well in this way: “*Unless you can trust and believe like a child, you’re going to be apt to miss what God’s up to.*”

Truly, Jesus’ even more stern words are directed to the adults in his midst who miss the opportunity for welcoming children (18:5 and 19:14) or who, worse yet create obstacles for children coming into the presence of God’s love through Jesus (18:6-7).

These are the words that our congregation considers in the forefront of our mission of “TEACHING the Word. Reaching the World” and our purposes of “forming and sustaining life-long, personal faith...engaging in cross-generational ministry...and radical hospitality.”

2. A Brief History within the ELCA—Somewhere in the late 60s a wide range of Lutheran congregations from the predecessor bodies of the ELCA began separating First Communion from Confirmation and began preparing children to receive their first communion when they reached fifth grade.

In its 1989 publication *A Statement on Communion Practices* the newly-formed ELCA affirmed the fifth grade and/or ten years of age as an appropriate and desirable guideline for when a young person, after appropriate preparation, may first commune.

However, it became apparent that focusing on a particular age as the *primary* criterion for determining when first communion is received did not adequately consider *other* important factors, e.g., a child’s maturity, a child’s experience in the church, a child’s family as a supportive context for faith, discipleship and understanding, etc.

After years of study and conversation, in 1997 the ELCA issued a new First Communion guideline as part of a larger document on the centrality of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion in the life of faith. This larger document is called ***The Use of the Means of Grace***, and it lifts up a biblically based Lutheran understanding of the Sacraments. Its intent is to help us avoid a “legalistic” and “mechanical” approach to how parents, pastors, and congregations raise up our children in the Christian faith—meaning that it is inappropriate to take something Jesus intends as GRACE and turn it into some sort of achievement on our part. Regarding Holy Communion the statement recognizes:

- “*Baptized children may begin to commune on a regular basis at a time determined*

*through mutual conversation that includes the pastor, the child, and the parents or sponsors involved, within the accepted practices of the congregation" (p. 41).**

- *"Ordinarily this beginning will occur only when children can eat and drink, and can start to respond to the gift of Christ in the Supper" (p. 41).*
- *"In all cases, participation in Holy Communion is accompanied by (instruction) appropriate to the age of the communicant" (p. 42).*
- *"There is no command from our Lord regarding the age at which people should be baptized or first communed. Our practice is defined by Christ's command ("Do this"), Christ's twin promises of his presence for us and for our need, and the importance of good order in the Church. In all communion practices congregations strive to avoid both reducing the Lord's Supper to an act effective by its mere performance without faith and narrowing faith to intellectual understanding of Christ's presence and gifts" (p. 43).*

(You can view the full 63-page *The Use of the Means of Grace* on our website at www.sslcmn.org/more-history-about-1st-communion.html.)

* **Note:** The phrase *"accepted practices of the congregation"* is an undefined reality that includes Biblical and pastoral teaching; practices of individual households; endorsement by congregational leadership; and more.

3. A Brief History within our Congregation—Our congregation's trajectory on this issue has been tracking younger after being on the older end of the spectrum for many years. This movement can be tracked through a number of phases.

For one, as our congregation's worship practice began to include the Wednesday evening service, a service that is almost exclusively attended by our youth and their families, we also began to recognize a significant piece of that congregation that was not able to commune even though their classmates were. Fifth graders, then, began to receive instruction for Holy Communion.

Additionally, as our congregation has grown in its outreach into our community, contacting and welcoming households who come to us from a variety of Christian backgrounds, congregations, and practices, we also began to commune younger children who had been instructed elsewhere, including Pastor Mike's children.

After Pastor Mike's arrival in the fall of 2013, our congregation began to invite households with children younger than fifth grade to receive instruction, beginning with 4th graders. However, this invitation also began to stretch to households with children younger than 4th grade with the following guidelines had been offered to those households:

- Is your child baptized?
- Is your child able to sit through worship?
- Can he/she participate in a 45 minute to 1 hour time of instruction and activity?
- Does your child have some basic sense of basic Bible stories, including especial-

ly Noah's Ark, Moses and the big stories of Exodus, and at least 3 stories about Jesus, including his Last Supper, his death, and resurrection?

- Has your child been asking questions about Holy Communion?
- Is your child aware enough of others in the congregation and the needs of others to show a degree of respect for the communion experience? Does your child have the ability to conduct himself/herself well during Holy Communion?
- Are you prepared to continue to fulfill the promises you made at your child's baptism to bring him or her regularly to the Lord's Table and to provide for his/her instruction in the Christian faith?

Pastor Mike had conversation with any household younger than 4th grade about these guidelines and reserved and exercised the right not to instruct younger children who couldn't meet those guidelines.

Most recently, we began to recognize the practice of a handful of households either who had come to us from other congregations who had a completely open welcome to the Table, or who had taken it upon themselves to begin teaching their children even younger than kindergarten about the Lord's Supper. Pastor Mike affirmed that parental teaching and encouraged those households with informal, conversational instruction about bringing their children to the Table.

In April 2016, through conversation with the Church Council, Pastor Mike was advised to create a more formalized curriculum to aid these households with "pre-reader" children in nurturing and growing their faith and practice.

4. A Welcome, an Encouragement, and Two Images for Passing on Faith—When children are presented for Holy Baptism, there are two sets of promises we hear.

The first set of promises is the most important, for in the water and the Word of baptism, God frees us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. God promises to us that nothing can separate us from God. God promises to forgive and renew us. God promises that as Jesus was raised from the dead, someday so will we be raised.

The second set of promises is our response to the promises that God makes to us. In this set, as parents and family members, we promise...

...to faithfully bring [our children] to the services of God's house, and teach them the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments. ...to place in their hands the Holy Scriptures and provide for their instruction in the Christian faith (service of Holy Baptism).

Likewise, we as a congregation, in response, promise to pray for, to support, to encourage, and to equip those households.

All of these promises are the foundation of our mission and purpose as a congregation. We encourage you, even in whatever tentative way that may be, to use this ma-

terial to continue working with your child(ren) and household in teaching and practicing the faith.

Two final images for passing on faith and practice, regardless of the ages of our children: in our states with a strong culture of hunting, the state government has identified some stake in instructing and licensing youth hunters—safety being one of the most important components. But the best instructed, most ethically-equipped, and safest youth hunters come from families where a hunting ethic and gun safety is instilled BY THEIR ELDERS long before the state licenses and sanctions them as hunters. These youth have been in the process of “becoming,” guided by the people most important in that process.

Second, in highly rural, predominantly agricultural states (like North Dakota, for example) youth could get their drivers’ license at the age of FOURTEEN! Why? Because the tradition and family practices of that largely agricultural state relied on youth even MUCH YOUNGER than 14 being able to drive trucks and other farm equipment. Those youth had been in the process of “becoming” drivers (and farmers), guided by the people most important in that process.

Our mission of *“Teaching the Word, Reaching the World”* is most robustly embodied when we take seriously equipping the adults most important in the process of our children’s “becoming” Christian. We want to help families create disciples of Jesus.

5. Some Teaching Strategies for Households with Pre-Readers

Before your child(ren) begin to receive Holy Communion:

1. Talk to Pastor Mike and let him know that your household will be intentionally working on this with your child(ren). Which ones and how old?
2. Any questions or concerns you may have about how to do this or what to do?

For children 3 to 5 years old and up:

- Children in this age level will still be operating from the connections and emotions that began in infancy. Feelings of security, trust, and love are primary motivators for children in this age bracket.
- Some theories describe this stage as the “pre-operational” stage, meaning children aren’t capable of working things out in their heads. Rather, they have to act; to try things out; and to work things out (like counting on their fingers).
- “Doing it by myself” also begins to become more of a drive, as well.
- Children will begin to copy the adults in their lives that they trust and with whom they feel secure.
- Making up stories with dolls or action figures begins in this age bracket.
- “Why?” begins to be a BIG question, even if the expectation isn’t well-reasoned,

adult logic.

Things to do to teach about Holy Communion:

1. **Read from an age-appropriate children’s picture Bible.**—We recommend *The Jesus Storybook Bible*, mainly because even the Old Testament stories keep us thinking and moving toward the love of God in Jesus. But there are others that are just fine, as well. When you read...

- ...focus on the parts of the story that speak particularly about God’s love.
- ...hold the child in your lap and cuddle.
- ...ask them to interact with and point to particular pieces of the pictures—i.e., “Can you show me the man who looks sad?” “Does he look happy now?” etc. etc.
- ...end your reading time with some sort of ritual—i.e., the sign of the cross on the child’s forehead; a hug; words like, “God loves you and so do I.”; or all of the above.

• Particular stories from *The Jesus Storybook Bible* that will become helpful in talking about God’s love made visible include but are not limited to:

“The beginning: a perfect home”—Genesis 1 & 2: God creates by speaking a Word., p. 18

“Son of Laughter,” “The present,” —Genesis 12-22: God makes & keeps promises., p. 57 & 62

“God to the Rescue,”—Exodus 3-13: includes the story of the Passover, p. 84

“Ten ways to be perfect,”—Exodus 16-17, 19-40: God feeds his children., p. 100

“The teeny, weenie...true king”—1 Samuel 16: God works through a young boy., p. 116

“The Good Shepherd”—Psalm 23: God provides and protects., p. 130

“A little servant girl and the proud general”—2 Kings 5: God works thru the common and the ordinary., p. 136

All of the stories about Jesus, but especially...

“How to pray”—Matthew 6: the Lord’s Prayer, p. 222

“The Friend of little children”—Matthew 18, 19, Mark 10, Luke 18, p. 256

“The Servant King”—Mark 14 & John 13-14: The Last Passover/Supper, p. 286

“A dark night in the garden”—Luke 22, Mark 14, John 18: God is with us in the dark., p. 294

“The sun stops shining”—Matt. 27, Mark 15, Luke 23, John 19: Jesus’ death., p. 302

“God’s wonderful surprise”—Matt. 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20: Jesus’ resurrection., p. 310

“Going home”—Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 14: Jesus is still with us even when we can’t see him., p. 318

Notes: (a) The themes listed here are more for your benefit as a parent than something to try to pass on to pre-operational children.

(b) Even to simply read and re-read Bible stories again and again and AGAIN with the understanding that these are stories that tell us about God’s love for us is probably THE most important thing you could do. For pre-operational children, just hearing the stories and seeing the pictures may be enough.

(c) **The “lap and cuddle time” and “cross, blessing, and hug” activities are VITAL in this pre-operational stage and are *as important* as the content of what you are reading.**

- Find other age-appropriate picture books in the church library.

2. Bring your child to worship and help him/her both become comfortable with the place and enjoy the time there.

- Sit up front where your child can see what’s going on.
- If he/she is not accustomed to coming forward for the Children’s Sermon, come up with him/her.
- Figure out ways to connect with your child’s 5 senses throughout worship—sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell. For example, if there are flowers on the altar, take him/her up to smell the flowers: *“Don’t they smell good? Flowers are one way we know God’s love for us.”*
- **Serve** with your child in worship. This can help him/her connect with that growing “doing it by myself” drive. For example...

...you can help with communion while he/she holds the baskets for the empty cups.

...you can both help collect the offering.

...you can say, *“We have a very special job today—we’re going to bake & share cookies for church tomorrow.”* Not only bake with your child; have him/her help put cookies on the trays.

Note(s): (a) All of these activities help create busy, active synapses of positivity in your child’s pre-operational brain.

(b) These become the foundations not only for later “First Communion Instruction” (see p. 8), but more importantly, for a life-time of faith and practice.

3. When it comes to Holy Communion...

- ...start slowly by simply giving your child a taste of your bread and wine. This might help simply quench whatever immediate curiosity he/she might have about what’s going on up there. It’s possible, he/she might be completely turned off by the bread and wine.

- ...if he/she is no longer curious, don't force the issue. Don't "make" him/her take your bread and wine.
- ...if your child responds well to having a taste, keep at that for a while before taking the next step.
- ...it is not "a cracker and juice." Gently but consistently correct this or other similar terminology.
- ...if behavior is an issue, simply stop for a few weeks. "Immediacy" is not the primary goal here. Even just a few weeks can matter greatly when it comes to a child's development.

Other things to know:

- For now, there is no planned milestone blessing to accompany this curriculum. This is a process between you, your child, the pastor, and God.
- "First Communion Instruction" as a formal teaching time with Pastor Mike, with the congregation's blessing as a milestone will come at a later point. (Go back and read the material on pages 4 and 5 for more of a rationale behind this.)
- What we are doing now is simply creating habit, ritual, and patterns with your child. We will go back and fill in "doctrine" and "instruction" when that is more developmentally appropriate.
- Questions, comments, or concerns? Don't hesitate to talk with Pastor Mike, who LOVES thinking about, planning for, talking about faith formation and equipping other adults to do it!

6. A Prayer for your Mission & Ministry as a Parent:

O God the Father of all humankind,

You have given to me these my children, and committed them to my charge to bring them up for You, and to prepare them for eternal life.

Help me, then, with your eternal, never-ending store of heavenly grace, that I may be able to fulfil this most sacred mission and stewardship.

Teach me both what to give and what to withhold; when to be patient and when to scold.

Make me to be gentle, yet firm;

considerate and watchful; and deliver me equally from the weakness of over-indulgence, and the excess of being too severe.

And grant that, both by word and example, I may be careful to lead them in the ways of wisdom and true faithful practice, so that at last I may accompany them to the unspeakable joys of our true home in heaven, in the company of all angels and saints.

Amen.