

Helloooooo Jesus!

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Rev. Jeff Mansfield



The Best Supper © Jan L. Richardson

Preaching on:
1 Corinthians 11:27–34a &
Mark 10:13–16

I have a true story that I want all the children to hear. There was once an ordinary 3-year-old boy sitting in his mother's lap. They were sitting in an ordinary Catholic Church on an ordinary Sunday. In a Catholic Church there's a little bell like this [RING] that gets rung when the priest is preparing the holy communion. The bell is rung as a symbol of Jesus showing up and becoming real in the bread and in the wine. And when it was time for the bell to ring, the bell rang as it always rings [RING]. Everything was just as it should be. And in the reverent silence that followed the music of the bell, something happened that no one was expecting:

The little boy sitting in his mother's lap hollered out, "Helloooooooooooooo Jesus!" The whole church turned around to look at him, and realizing he had an audience, he gave them an encore performance, "Helloooooooooooooo Jesus!" just in case they had missed it the first time.

The little boy understood something that a lot of us grownups know, but that we don't really all-the-time believe—that when we participate in the sacrament of communion, God always, always shows up. Us grownups know what we're supposed to believe, but do we believe like that child believes? Do we believe with that kind of spontaneous, uncontrollable, unequivocal joy? I wonder.

So, let's give it a try, shall we? Kids, when I ring this bell, I have an important job for you. Can you say, "Helloooooo Jesus!"? Let's try after I ring the bell [RING]. Should we let the grownups in on this? Everybody this time [RING]! All right. Now, kids, every time I ring this bell, I need you all to say, "Hello Jesus!" The grownups will do it too, but they need your help. They need to hear you start it off with faith and joy to give them encouragement. Can you do that? So, whenever I ring this bell, you're gonna be ready, right [RING]? WOW. Great work.

I received this true story from Pádraig Ó Tuama, one of our great Christian poets. Oh, of course. Of course, he's a poet. Only a poet could love a church story like that—bunch of bohemians and troublemakers! Sure, we take pleasure in the story too but mostly because it happened to somebody else at some other church. We're a little bit poet, but we're also a little bit like the priest in the story, who Ó Tuama said looked shocked. "Shut the child up, you could hear in [his] fear." That's us, too, sometimes. Why so serious? Why does mixing children and communion make us feel so nervous?

We probably have Paul to thank. You heard what he said to the Corinthian church this morning:

"Whoever, 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. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves."

Whew! Those are some harsh words! And we're right to wonder if children attending the Lord's Supper are capable of such sober self-reflection. Certainly, if someone had written to Paul asking him, "Hey, some people are bringing their kids to communion. Should we let them eat or not?" and he responded with these words, we'd want to be very careful about when we introduced our children to a table that could land them in spiritual judgment and physical illness. Fortunately, we know for sure that Paul was not answering that particular question.

The situation Paul was responding to was a young church in crisis. There were deep divisions among the Corinthians. They weren't getting along. There was infighting, and there were factions. In the face of this conflict the practice of the Lord's Supper had taken a bad turn. Instead of everybody eating the common meal together, as they used to do, some people are arriving earlier and eating before the others arrive. They're eating so much that by the time the latecomers get there, the early birds are drunk and there's no food left for anyone else. *This* is the situation Paul is responding to, and his harsh words sound totally appropriate now. Selfishness, partisanship, and drunkenness were the causes of the spiritual and physical distress in the community, and they had to be corrected.

But this is a problem only grownups could cause, so is it appropriate to prescribe their extraordinary medicine to the ordinary spiritual lives of our children? There's no reason to think that, if Paul had been asked, he couldn't have said in the next sentence, "Children should approach the table with age-appropriate reverence and self-reflection, which will develop naturally through the years as long as you grownups are setting a good example!"

Setting a good example means behaving ourselves and taking communion seriously. But setting a good example also means requiring our children to observe us taking communion seriously. In fact, what does Paul say just a few lines later? He says: "So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another." *Wait for one another*. It's not the Lord's table until everyone has arrived to the table.

Which seems to me to say that whether they're eating and drinking or not, our children should be "at the table." We shouldn't be having communion without them ever being here.

I've always found the idea of a "World" Communion Sunday to be redundant. It's redundant theologically to say "World" Communion Sunday. Of course, it's the whole world! Maybe it's redundant, but it's still a good reminder for our practice of communion. This is not my table, not your table, not the United Church of Christ's table, or Glen Ridge Church's table. This is God's Table. And the whole world (young and old, gay and straight and everyone anywhere on the rainbow spectrum, every gender, every race, every nationality) is welcome here. When we step up to this table, we acknowledge that we need God's love and care. And we must acknowledge that we share this table with the whole human race. ALL ARE WELCOME.

Still, we feel a little nervous. We worry. What if they think it's just a snack? What if they're disruptive or disrespectful? What if they put their grimy little paws all over the bread just before I get to it? There are good theological and practical responses to all these worries. But let's face it: *all* of us, at least *some of the time*, are going to feel a little nervous about what totally age-appropriate but oh-so-naughty thing our kid or someone else's kid is about to do in the middle of holy, sacred, serious church. What do we do?

We can't all become like the mad poets—delighted every time God shocks us with something unexpected

from the mouths of babes. We can't totally get rid of the priest within us who just wants everything to go smoothly and orderly in the house of God. But maybe we could be more like the little boy's mother.

The poet was delighted. The priest was terrified. The mother, Ó Tuama said, looked a little embarrassed and a little thrilled. A little of both. As a parent I totally get that. Can we let the joy of our children being in worship with us soothe the shock of what it looks and sounds like when they too begin take Jesus seriously? Can we try to become more like Jesus who said, Let the children come to me, just as they are. I don't want them to be more like grownups. I want the grownups to be a little more like them.

Remember, even though that little boy was only three, and even though he wouldn't be able to take communion in his church for four to six more years, he knew, perhaps more than anyone else in the church,

what it meant when that bell rang [RING]. He learned it simply by sitting in his mother's lap and by absorbing the ritual happening all around him. Isn't there room in our church for taking Jesus that seriously?

I want to say to our confirmands, from Glen Ridge Congregational and Union Congregational, I want you to know, on the cusp between childhood and young adulthood, that all these grownups are right to take this table so seriously. And I want you to know that I take it seriously, and I want you to know why.

When I was in college, I was the director of a Christian summer camp in North Carolina. I was too young for the job, but the old director had to step down suddenly, and he believed in me and tapped me to cover the summer program for him. It was a great experience overall, but one week early in the summer, it was a real disaster.

It rained all week, which is always a sign things are going to go real bad at summer camp. We were at capacity, and we had a tough bunch of energetic campers bouncing off the walls. During a thunderstorm one night, lightning struck a cabin of little kids and scared those campers half to death. I was backing a 15-passenger van up in the parking lot in foul weather, and I backed into a BMW-Z3. It

belonged to the chair of the camp ministry committee. Her husband had just given it to her to celebrate her retirement a few weeks earlier. It was towed away, along with my dignity. My girlfriend of a few years was at camp with me, and she was about to dump me, and I knew it was coming, and I knew there was nothing I could do to stop it. Everybody was looking to me for leadership in the hardest week of camp, but I was green, I was stressed out, I didn't always know what to do, I lost my temper a few times, and I really let my staff down.

But on the closing night of camp, we celebrated like we always celebrated—with communion. We didn't *want* to celebrate *anything*. We were tired, wet, cold, muddy, and mad. We wanted to quit. But out of habit,

a bunch of 17-to-21-year-olds sat down at God's table with our heads hung low. And out of habit we said the words. Out of habit we passed the bread, and we shared the cup.

And a miracle happened out in those woods—God showed up. When we ate and drank, we began to lift our heads, we started looking one another in the eyes, tears started streaming down faces, apologies were whispered silently across the room, we were hugging campers and meaning it when we told them we loved every minute we had spent with them that week.

We were nobodies! Just a bunch of kids running a summer camp in the woods. I was a nobody. I still am. I'm not special. I'm not famous. I'm not particularly important. I'm just Pastor Jeff. But when we sat at this table, when we broke the bread, and passed the cup to one another, God showed up for us. God showed up for me! So that I could forgive myself, and grow, and keep going because there was a lot of camp left to run.

That's the promise: That when you make this table a part of your spiritual life, when you decide to take it seriously and to honor it and to kneel before it with your heavy heart, asking for forgiveness, seeking reconciliation, looking for the path to love, God will show up for all of you too.

Isn't that a table you want to take seriously? Isn't that a God you'd like to get to know better? Isn't that the God we all want our children to meet?

Well, Beloved, I promise you, you will always find God at this table.

[RING]