
All I Needed to Know About Receiving Christ, I Learned in Holy Eucharist Instruction Class!

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A Sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Proper 5A

*"You are the light of the world," Jesus said,
" ... Let your light shine before others,
so that they may see your good works
and give glory to your father in heaven." (Matthew 5:14,16)*

You are the light of the world! You!

It is a delight to welcome a special group of children, and their families and guests, to the 8:45 a.m. service this morning. You are the light of the world! This is a group of people who have just participated in the Cathedral's special classes on receiving Holy Communion, a series we call the "Holy Eucharist Instruction Class." They have learned the background of Holy Communion and how to receive Holy Communion. Some children have already been receiving communion since they were baptized; and for others, today will be their first communion.

All of us are celebrating communion! For all of us, today is a day to remember the light of the world that comes to us through Holy Communion.

A few years ago, someone wrote a book titled "All I Needed to Know in Life, I learned in Kindergarten." Of course, some of the principles in that book were quite serious. Today, I want to title this sermon the same way:

"All I needed to know about receiving Christ, I learned in the Holy Eucharist Instruction Class." All I needed to know about communion with God, I learned in Holy Eucharist Instruction Class.

When I say "receive Christ," of course, I do not mean only the verbal commitment of faith. I mean receiving communion. I mean coming up to the altar rail and receiving the consecrated bread and wine of Eucharist, the spiritual body and blood of Christ.

I like to say that, in the Episcopal Church, we are just like our evangelical brothers and sisters. We, too, have an altar call each Sunday. We give everyone an opportunity to come down to the front of the church and receive Christ. That's why the priest says, "The gifts of God for the people of God." "The Body of Christ." "The Blood of Christ." We Episcopalians want everyone to receive Christ.

So, today, I want to remind us of some child wisdom, some simple wisdom, some principles we learned as children. When you come to the altar to receive Christ, remember these principles:

1. Gravity is a law of God.

These children have been taught how to hold their hands flat, on top of each other, to receive Christ. And, yet, some of us adults will continue to come to the altar rail with our hands tilted, like a sliding board, maybe, as if we are testing to see if God will defy the law of gravity.

No, gravity is a law of God! If we hold our hands open and flat at the altar, we will receive Christ more easily.

This physical principle has a spiritual corollary. Open hands receive Christ more easily than a clenched fist. In the spiritual life, God cannot give us Christ when our hands are closed, or when our hands are clenched, or when our spirits are clenched or closed.

Number 2. In the same way, grabbing does not get you what you need.

These children have learned that trying to pinch the wafer from the priest's hand does not work. Let the priest place the wafer in your open hand. Don't try to pick it up from her hand yourself, because the odds are the both of you will collide and miss the hand-off. (Be like the relay runner. Let the priest place the baton in your hand.)

There are folks who come to the altar not in the attitude of receiving at all. They come with their fingers out ready to grab.

Again, the spiritual corollary is the same. Receiving Christ is not accomplished by acquisitive grabbing, like so much else in the world these days. Receiving Christ is about not grabbing. God gives us the light of the world when we are open and receptive, not when we are anxious and acquisitive!

Number 3. Your eyes show forth the light of the world! Keep your head up and watch!

These children have learned to keep their heads up when they drink from the chalice. It is hard to drink wine when you are facing downward. If you are facing downward, the wine will not flow upward, against the law of gravity.

In fact, children have known this since we were infants: "If I cannot see your eyes, I cannot see the real you." Let your eyes shine forth when you receive communion and receive Christ. And don't wear sunglasses to church.

God, too, wants to see us. Look up.

4. When the time comes to receive Christ, be eager! Step forward!

In other words, these children have learned to be prompt and orderly. Don't make people wait on you. There is nothing so wonderful as a child hopeful and eager to come to communion.

Our ushers are not supposed to get in your way, or delay you. Our vergers and priests are not supposed to slow you down. They are supposed to make it easier for you to get here quickly! God loves our eagerness.

Some of us make the sign of the cross before we receive communion. That's a good thing. But if it is my practice to make the sign of the cross before I receive communion, I do it before the priest arrives. I do not hold up the line with my own personal acts of devotion.

The spiritual corollary is this: Sometimes, God is reaching to bless us. Sometimes God is right here, waiting to bless us; but we are so busy taking the time and energy doing religious things, that we miss the blessing. Don't let our religious acts get in the way of God's blessing right now!

5. It is a blessed thing to receive communion as a family.

That's why these children have invited so many of their family members to be present today.

One of the hardest jobs of our priests and vergers is knowing who our families are-and how to get all of them at the altar at the same time. It is not the Church's intention to break up families at the altar rail!

Well, the more we come to church as a family, the more people know who is in our family.

The spiritual corollary is this: When our families share the light of Christ together, that light is magnified and glorious! The world sees the light better, the larger our community is!

6. Don't put your fingers in the food.

Yes, most children in our culture have been learning this for years. Don't put your fingers in the food!

If you are dipping the wafer into the cup of wine, don't put your fingers in the cup! Did you know that our fingers carry more germs than our lips and mouths do? Intinction defeats the desire for cleanliness if we let the germs from our hands get inside the cup.

The corollary is this: Ultimately, our own emphasis on spiritual cleanliness does allow us to receive Christ more easily.

These are six principles. You may be able to think of more. The gist is this: Receive the kingdom of God as a child. The basic laws of gravity and physics, cleanliness and efficiency, which we all learned as a child, are remarkably similar to the spiritual laws of God.

We receive more easily when we are open, and when our hands are flat. We receive more easily when we are looking, not when we are hidden. We receive more easily when we don't let religious acts get in the way. We receive more easily when we are known as families. And the better we receive, the better we will transmit the light of Christ.

But there's one more principle! A seventh principle on how to receive communion, how to receive Jesus Christ! And that is: Have fun! Communion with God is supposed to be fun! Celebrate! Smile!

You are the light of the world! Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven!

AMEN.

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