

**“The Hearty Eucharist,”** preached at Marquand on November 18, 2005 by Bill Goettler, Co-Pastor at First Presbyterian Church of New Haven, and lecturer in Presbyterian Polity and Field Education at YDS.

Matthew 25:31-46

I was worried about the junior high Sunday school curriculum. That alone might be enough to give pause to those of you who are envisioning going into parish ministry. Junior high Sunday school curriculum is perhaps not something that should keep one up at night.

But the junior high Sunday school class at the church that I serve had been thriving. The denominational curriculum that was being used by our teachers had covered first the Hebrew Scriptures, bringing to life the stories of Moses and Miriam, of David, of Esther, of Ruth. Then, last year, the curriculum moved on to the Christian New Testament. The class spent the year hearing the gospel story once more, and getting to know the Apostle Paul.

Junior High Sunday School curriculum, like so many things in our lives, comes in three year cycles. And with two down, there were no more Testaments to cover. When the UPS driver dropped this year’s material at the church door, I went into a panic. Somehow, in their wisdom, the curriculum writers had decided that what sixth, seventh and eighth grade students now really needed to learn was a little bit of church history.

Church history? I envisioned awkward 13 year olds discussing Tertullian, debating Augustine’s *Confessions*. And then, more realistically, I envisioned awkward adolescents doing everything they could to avoid the Christian Education hour entirely. Our healthy program would soon be in shambles. Perhaps I’m telling you more than you want to know about my relationship with the study of church history.

The first day of the fall Sunday School program began, and thought I recognized the smell of bread baking. I went to investigate, and found a dozen teenagers, pulling freshly baked rolls from the oven. They looked up at me, guiltily. “We are having a *love feast*,” one explained. “We’re allowed... it says so right here in our Sunday School book!” “But it’s a secret,” said another. “The early church was persecuted. No one can know about our feast.”

As the weeks of fall progressed, the class began to grow in number, and in enthusiasm. “The early church shared everything in common,” the kids would say when I’d stick my head in the door, curious about that week’s treats. “They ate their meals together, and so are we!” After the conversion of Constantine they learned, the love feast went public. No longer did Christian faith need to be hidden. Now the class could show their feast more brazenly... but still, each morning, they’d eat together.

I could scoff, of course. I could complain that this new curriculum is merely bribing children with treats instead of teaching them theology. I could inquire about what they now believe, about how their faith has grown.

But the Gospel readings all fall have come from Matthew. And Matthew seems to have something to say about meals shared, about eating in the household of God. If we want to look to

the new realm that God will usher in, Matthew writes, we'd better take a look at who is sitting around our table.

Because Matthew's first concern is not about what we proclaim about our faith. God's final judgement, the Gospel insists, will pay little heed to our theologies of grace, our talk of justification. It won't even hinge on our confession of faith in Jesus Christ. What will count, Matthew insists, is whether we have acted with loving care for needy people. What matters is whether we have fed one another, whether we've invited those who've come hungry into our midst. Providing food and drink, clothing and shelter, visiting the sick and imprisoned all seems to have a deeper dimension. In our action, we care not just for one another, but for Christ.

My concern is that the junior high Sunday school class can't understand any of this. They think that they are just getting lucky this fall, sharing a meal at Sunday school, cooking for one another, baking treats.

They can't possibly know the reasons that the early church knew, in the love feast, the center of their community's identity.

I sit in on their class on a November morning. Apples and ripe pears cover their table. There is warm bread, yet again. Their conversation is about the requirements of faithfulness. "When we share food with one another," one girl says, "its not just us at the table. Christ is right here with us."

I look on, shocked. I don't expect such words from a child. What, after all, do these children know about a hurting world, of hungry people, and thirsty? But still, here they are, at table, learning about, experiencing the transforming power of doing the will of God.

Claiming Christian faith, calling Jesus Lord, is the basic confession of faith in the early church. This too they have learned. But it is not enough. Nor is prophecy, exorcism or miraculous deeds. Unless one *does the will of God*, Jesus will find every claim to faith lacking.

My seventh grade friends seem somehow to understand that Christ is at the table with them on those Sunday mornings. Maybe I'm the one who needs convincing.

This community, this YDS worship community, has over several years developed the autumn tradition the hearty Eucharist. It too is a love feast of sorts, with a fuller table, and a different pace for worship as the semester's end draws near. It is a simple meal, in which we feed one another and are fed, in which we break bread and pour wine together.

A simple meal, that is, if we insist that we are at this table alone. But Matthew claims that we are not alone here. At this table, and every time that we feed those who gather, Christ is in our midst. At the prison, at every hospital bed that we visit, Christ is there. When we stand to challenge the war making, the racism, the economic injustices that are all too familiar in our society, Christ is at our side. Christ is in fact the one who is comforted. Bread we say, and Cup. And Christ too is fed. In every act of ministry. In every effort to heal creation.

Too much, of course, for a class full of junior high school students to understand. But curiously, they keep coming. A feast, for all to share. Eat then, and be satisfied. Amen.

