

May 7, 2023
The Fifth Sunday of Easter
Year A
1 Peter 2:2-10
John 14:1-14
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

A Place for You

Every year, I try to schedule First Communion Sunday for the Third Sunday of Easter. I do that because I know what's coming on that Sunday. I know that every year, on the third Sunday of Easter the gospel reading is going to be about the resurrected Jesus eating a meal with his disciples; making breakfast on the shores of the sea of Galilee, eating fish in the upper room to show his disciples that he truly was alive again, being made known in the breaking of the bread in the house in Emmaus. How perfect is that? Sharing with the first communicants that Jesus is made known to us in the meal of Holy Communion, that Jesus shows us his resurrected presence in the food that we eat around this table, that Jesus meets us, that Jesus feeds us, that Jesus is made known to us in the breaking of the bread. It's liturgically, scripturally perfect for First Communion Sunday.

But sometimes practicality outweighs the lectionary, so, when the Third Sunday of Easter happens to fall on one of the Sundays of school break, as it did this year, I don't schedule it for the Third Sunday of Easter. I have learned over twenty years of congregational ministry that scheduling important and child or youth centered things over school breaks can be a mistake.

So, this year, without even looking at the scripture readings, I scheduled First Communion Sunday for today, the Fifth Sunday of Easter. I had no idea what I was getting myself into scripturally, I didn't even think to look. I just knew that the date worked out on the calendar.

It's kind of funny, I know that the readings are for the Easter Day, of course. I know what they are for the second, third, and fourth Sundays of Easter. But I had no idea what they were for the fifth Sunday of Easter. Which is how I ended up a "God says hi" moment. That's what I call those moment when it feels like God is not quite so hidden as sometimes it can feel like God is; one of those moments where you realize that God is with you in very practical and tangible ways.

You see, I could have scheduled First Communion for last Sunday, which wasn't spring break. But I just felt like the scheduled worked out a little bit better for this week. Imagine how surprised, how thrilled I was when I looked at the readings for this Sunday and saw these words. "Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good." (1 Peter 2:2-3)

Today is Gabby, Zakk, and Finley's First Communion Day. Today they will get a chance to taste and see that the Lord is good.

Since early March they have been preparing for this day. In our First Communion classes, we have been learning about how God cares for us, how Jesus gives us a special meal, how Jesus is with us in communion, how Jesus feeds us and teaches us to share with others.

We started every First Communion class, except for yesterday's First Communion event, by bouncing a ball around. We did it the first week, to make sure that we knew each other's names, and then we did it every other week, because it was a good way to start, to get into First Communion class mode and because it was fun. During our last class, we had to bounce the ball to another person and say their name and something that we had learned about that other person. Things like: Gabby plays soccer, Finley likes sushi, Zakk can make a sound like a tetradactyl, Pastor Amanda is a pastor, Mrs. Sol, our adult helper, has a daughter.

Once we had done that, I had us bounce the ball around the circle, but before we could bounce the ball to another person, we had to say something that we had learned about Jesus. Around and around the ball went with words like this:

Jesus loves us.

Jesus feeds us.

Jesus provides for us.

Jesus saves us.

Jesus died for us.

Jesus forgives us.

Jesus rose from the dead.

Jesus is with us.

Jesus is made known to us in the breaking of the bread.

Clearly, our First Communion kids have learned some important things about Jesus. From their families, from Sunday School, from worship, from other church experiences, and from First Communion class they have learned something about the goodness of God.

And today, they get to taste, and know that the Lord is good. Today, as they take their place at the Lord's table, they will get to experience the goodness of God in a new way; a way that goes beyond intellectual assent, a way that goes beyond knowing with their heads, and being able to repeat things that others have told them.

In Holy Communion we get to experience the presence of Jesus, the love and the goodness of God that is there for us even if we can't quite wrap our heads around it. Because Holy Communion, even though the kids spent weeks learning about it, isn't a head thing. It's not something that we can logic or reason ourselves into understanding. It's a gift that is given to us that we don't deserve. It's the

presence of the living Lord of the universe, given for us, his blood shed for us, so that we don't just have to think and know, but so that we can touch and smell and see and taste. It is a sensory experience, in which our embodied God comes to us, comes to our bodies, comes to us all. And all of us, no matter how old we are, can only receive this gift as little children, as newborn infants, who need to receive a food for which we could never work, a gift we could never earn.

But the readings for today had another gift to offer us on this First Communion Sunday. Yesterday we had what I call our First Communion event. All the years that I've been doing it, I've never come up with a better name for it. Anyway, for the First Communion event, Gabby, Zakk, and Finley gathered with seven teenagers and five adults to hear a communion story and play a communion game. To tour the sacristy to learn about how communion is prepared and what all of the things on the altar are called. To bake the bread that will be used for Communion today and to prepare skits that they shared with their parents that helped share the story of communion, stories about God bringing freedom, and about forgiveness and fellowship bring found bread and wine.

There's the theme to the whole First Communion Event. The theme, the name of the book we read, the name of the game we play, the center of all of the events of the day, is "A Place for You". Through the events of the day, we are trying to share with the First Communion children, that there is a place for them at God's table, where God will meet them, feed them, and be with them, and where they will be surrounded by the community of faith, supporting them, loving them, and welcoming them.

So, imagine how pleased I was when I read our gospel reading for today and say these words,

"[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father's house there are many dwelling

places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?”

Jesus spoke those words to his disciples in the gospel of John, on the night before his arrest and crucifixion. But we hear them in the light of the resurrection. We hear them and know that Jesus has gone, in his ascension, to prepare a heavenly home for us.

But I also hear them today, and am reminded that there is a place for us, here and now. And there is a place for Gabby, Zakk, and Finley, here and now, at the communion table that Jesus has prepared for us, for them. At this table that Jesus has prepared for us, this table where Jesus meets us and feeds us we all experience what is called a foretaste of the feast to come, a foretaste and a glimpse of heaven. We do not have to wait for heaven to know the presence of God, for Jesus meets us here and goes with us into the world. We look forward with longing, with heavenly hope, to the day when we will be where Jesus is, but one of the promises made to us in this Holy Communion meal is that Jesus is where we are. Jesus will never leave us or forsake us, and there is always a place for us here.

Here’s an interesting thing. Before we started First Communion classes, Gabby and Zakk and Finley didn’t know each other. They each walked into what was essentially a room of four strangers, two other kids and two adults, in a church basement, and I’m sure that they didn’t have any idea what to expect.

What happened quickly, though, was that they became friends, and we became a community. As we bounced a ball around and played games and asked questions and told stories, we started to know each other, to laugh together, even to care about each other. I heard from one of the parents that their child would look forward to coming to First Communion class every week; that she couldn’t wait to get out the door, to get to church, to see her friends, her people at First Communion.

The time in class always flew by. Our classes were scheduled for an hour and a half and every week I would look at the clock and see that we had fifteen minutes left and wonder how it had happened. Where did the time go?

But perhaps it shouldn't surprise me that in that little First Communion class, God created a community. That's what God does, as we hear in the reading from First Peter:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy (1 Peter 2:9-10).

God takes people from many races, from many nations, from many places, from many towns, from many schools, and makes them into a people. God's love, God's power, God's grace, bring us together and make us one. A couple of months ago, Gabby, Zakk, and Finley were strangers to each other. Now they are friends, a community. Once they were not a people, but now, together, they are God's people.

And we are a community too, with Gabby, Zakk and Finley and with all who have been baptized into God's love, who meet each other and Jesus at this table, for Jesus has prepared a place for us here.

We, with Gabby, Zakk, and Finley, are blessed to know, blessed to hear, blessed to taste, blessed to see, that we are God's people, who feast on God's word, and who are fed at God's table of grace. We are recipients of God's mercy, and

blessed to proclaim to the whole world the goodness of God and the mighty acts of God who calls us out of darkness and into light.

Gabby, Zakk, and Finley, on behalf of the whole church, we are blessed to say, “Welcome to the Lord’s table.” There is a place for you here. Amen.