

## And Tell Your Brother You're Sorry

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Sermon for June 20, 2021

Episcopal Church of the Holy Cross, Dunn Loring, VA

### **Readings for 4 Pentecost, Proper 7B**

1 Samuel 17: (1a, 4-11, 19-23), 32-49

Psalm 9:9-20

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

Mark 4:35-41

### **Sermon**

I don't remember my first Communion.

I'm sure there are pictures of an extremely blond Roman Catholic youngster that would jog my memory of that rite of passage, but I don't remember it.

I remember the first time I had a host. My home parish served bread, but my aunt and uncle's parish here in the DC area used hosts. When the priest handed it to me, I had no idea what it was, so I just sort of held it loosely in my fingers and stared as I walked back to my seat and then dropped it. Embarrassed, I just kept walking.

When I got back to my seat, I asked my dad. "What were we given?"

"They're hosts, Kevin—wafers," Dad whispered.

"Oh," I said. "Because I didn't know what it was, and I dropped mine."

"That was YOURS?"

I love you, Dad. If you're watching: Happy Father's Day!

### **My First Confession**

Like I said, I don't remember my first communion.

I do, however, remember my first confession. Communion required confession, you see. Sin against God and neighbor held one back from full participation in the life of the Church. One had to go and be reconciled before going to Communion. As Jesus said, "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24).

Thus, First Reconciliation preceded First Communion. With so many other youngsters, I attended church one evening, and made my way into one of three lines.

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned—this is my first confession,” I said and confessed that I’d fought with my younger brother Brian and hit him. The priest asked if there was anything else, and that was pretty much it for me. He walked me through the Act of Contrition, which I’d only sort of memorized, and then I waited for the 5 Our Fathers and 10 Hail Marys I would have to say, when he did something incredible:

*Now, I want you to go home and apologize.*

What?

*Apologize.*

To my brother?

Yes.

But he’s younger than me...

*You told me you were sorry. Tell him. Go home, and tell your brother you’re sorry. That’s your penance.*

### **Communion Requires Confession**

Like I said, I don’t remember my first Communion, but I remember that: Go home and tell your brother you’re sorry. Because Communion requires Confession.

As other denominations consider excommunication of public officials for their political stances or lack thereof, and as we consider Eucharist anew after fasting for so long, it’s as good a time as any to consider: What makes Communion real?

As we slowly return to typical Sunday worship, keeping in mind the comfort levels of all our parishioners after more than a year of precaution, we are celebrating Eucharist again in two weeks. Personally, I’d like to spend that time in Reconciliation in forgiving and seeking forgiveness that goes beyond the often-rote public confession we make every Sunday.

I’d like to spend this time, and I ask you to join me in some way, in the work of forgiveness. Because Eucharist involves Reconciliation, Communion requires Confession.

### **David and Goliath**

I imagine everyone here knows something of the power of receiving Communion. We recover our innocence up here. That which was ugly is made beautiful up here, if only for a moment. We are righteous here. We gain the power to speak truth, seek justice, and share righteousness with a world of iniquity and inequity. We are innocent here, righteous here, and God is with us here. In short, we are like David: we are young again, handsome, innocent, plucked from obscurity and made royal, noble, righteous. God is on our side. And we have the power “with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left,” with the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, to attack the

monsters, the demons, the Goliaths in our souls and in our society. That's what it means to receive Communion.

But David picked up five stones on his way to slay Goliath. As I walk up to receive Communion, as I recover my innocence, righteousness, godliness, as I stand victorious over Goliath, I turn and I still have four stones. Who are those other four stones for?

I confess: They're for you.

In receiving Communion, I am David, God's own anointed, but, to some neighbor out there, to some neighbor in here, even to God above, I may just be Goliath.

I ask you: How is it Communion if we're David at the altar but Goliath in the pews? David at church but Goliath at home? David before our priests but Goliath before our siblings?

How do I approach this altar resenting the person who kneels across from me—who I would deliver to the beasts of the field if I had half a chance? How do I approach this altar unconsciously thinking I'm better than the one next to me? How do I come up here thinking that my life matters more? We call this Communion and act as if that's as much fact as it is hope.

We receive Communion when we should be participating in it.

### **Fasting from Communion?**

Without reconciliation, Communion becomes empty ritual.

The Church recognizes this. According to the Book of Common Prayer and the Constitution and Canons of the Episcopal Church, a priest can, with sufficient notice, and subject to certain requirements, deny Eucharist to "a person who is living a notoriously evil life" without "clear proof of repentance and amendment of life," and to "those who have done wrong to their neighbors and are a scandal to the other members of the congregation...until they have made restitution for the wrong they have done, or have at least promised to do so." Finally:

When the priest sees that there is hatred between members of the congregation, he shall speak privately to them, telling them that they may not receive Communion until they have forgiven each other. And if the person or persons on one side truly forgive the others and desire and promise to make up for their faults, but those on the other side refuse to forgive, the priest shall allow those who are penitent to come to Communion, but not those who are stubborn.

These requirements are as old as the Anglican Church, if rarely enforced.

These rules are not here to be weaponized, to wantonly engage in denying Eucharist to opponents, although they have been. Playing that game, you quickly find there's no one worthy of distributing or receiving. "Let he who has no sin..." and all that.

The rules are there because they teach us to recognize the circumstances under which our Communion becomes more ritual than Sacrament. After all, is there really Communion in Christ if notorious sin persists—if, say, our reliance on violence, on money, on status, on technology, on whiteness and its privileges, rather than Jesus—goes unaddressed? Is there really Communion if our treatment of the poor and powerless, of LGBTQ persons, of people of color, of the environment goes unrecognized? Is there really Communion where injury is unspoken, where scandal haunts the parish? Is there Communion if division and hatred continue, if conflict is avoided, if forgiveness is withheld?

Knowing that there are meaningful limits to Eucharist, what if we voluntarily fasted from Eucharist? What if we withheld Eucharist on the basis of something other than pandemic precautions? Imagine that.

What if Roman Catholic bishops withheld Eucharist not on the basis of one's politics but by saying all American dioceses must fast from Eucharist until they have sufficiently atoned for sexual abuse by priests in their midst?

What if the Episcopal Church—or perhaps just a diocese—fasted from Eucharist until the diocese had sufficiently atoned for its role in slavery or, at least, until it had a plan for reparations?

What if a parish said to itself we won't celebrate Eucharist without spending some time thinking about what Communion really means to us so that when we do celebrate it, it's real?

### **Confession as Communion**

Communion requires Confession, and again, not to be held over a parish as a means of control, but as a means of freeing ourselves from the past, restoring justice, and finding peace. When we welcome Jesus in Confession, when we invite God to speak to our souls and society, he is present just as surely as when he is placed in our hands in Communion.

When Jesus says to the storm, "Silence! Be silent!" and the wind and the sea obey, Jesus speaks with same breath that hovered over the primordial waters. Jesus, then, speaks to the winds and waters of our sin-soaked souls and sodden society. Jesus re-creates them, makes them good again.

When Jesus says to the storm, "Silence! Be silent!" he uses the same words as he does earlier in Mark's Gospel to exorcise a demon: "Be silent and come out of him!" Jesus' word brings peace where there was none, and a great calm is the result. The word for calm here is thought to be related to the word for laughter. Imagine the disciples as the storm is suddenly silent. Heh heh?

It is perhaps the nervous, uncomfortable laugh of relief, of recognition, of hope. It is the laugh of a seven-year-old Roman Catholic kid trying to explain to his brother that he's

sorry. I wonder if Brian remembers this the way I do, or even at all. When I told him I needed to talk to him, he looked at me like I had two heads. When I said I was sorry, I must have grown a third. Apparently, hitting him was normal; it was the apology that was weird.

That's real Communion. That look. And that awkward laugh of relief and recognition that says: this, this togetherness, this new honesty, this new understanding, this new forgiveness, this great calm is what's normal, God's hope for us. And that's only done if we take Confession seriously. And we needn't be afraid of the truth. Innocent and guilty, righteous and unrighteous, God is always with us.

## **Conclusion**

I invite you to prayer in these next two weeks. Because two weeks' notice is not incidentally the notice required by the prayer book. No one's losing out on Communion. No one earns Communion—it comes to us as a gift, how can we take it away?—but we can earn the name. How do we make our Communion more real, if we can say that? What would it take to pray, sing, stand, sit, kneel, distribute, receive Communion not only as individuals but as one—in two weeks and beyond?

You might join us in prayer during our 24-hour vigil this weekend. Spend 30 minutes in prayer for one another. You might spend some time with Jesus. Ask him to help you find the stones you've been carrying, the stones that have been thrown at you, the stones you've thrown at others.

Here's an idea: Go to confession. Contact Kelly, and tell her you'd like to receive Reconciliation of Penitent. It's page 447.

Or, perhaps, because this is the kind of thing priests will tell you: think of one or two people you've wronged in the last 15 months. Think about what else got locked down in this dread season. Think of a time when you let hunger, or anger, or loneliness, or fatigue get the better of you, and you hurt somebody. You know who they are. Just think of the people you're avoiding, the ones you're not talking to. You know why. Go to them and apologize. Whatever happens, Jesus loves you. God is always with you.

Lest our next Communion be just another of many forgettable Sacraments: Remember that Eucharist involves reconciliation, that communion requires confession.

Lest this loving Body of Christ slip through our fingers, please:

Go home—and tell your brother you're sorry.