

Opening Chapter of *Gifts of Communion: Celebrating our Story with God* by the Rev. Furman Buchanan  
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## Chapter 1

### CELEBRATING COMMUNION

*A Perfect Picture of God's Love*



He is the image of the invisible God...

There are times in life when we embark upon journeys that lead us to new places, new discoveries, and new challenges. These times are often filled with anticipation, fear, excitement, and perhaps even dread. One such occasion in the life of Jesus' friends took place in a hidden room they borrowed from a stranger with only the basic staples required for a meal that turned out to be the last supper.

Taken together, the four Gospels explicitly identify only three things being present with Jesus and the disciples in that room—water, bread, and wine. On the night he was handed over to suffering and death, Jesus used the bowl of water to wash the feet of his friends. He broke the bread to feed his friends. And after supper, Jesus took the cup to celebrate with his friends.

Celebrate?

These are the first, simple gifts of communion—of togetherness in the light of God's love—even when that light appeared as a dimly burning wick in a dark room filled with doubts, fears, and confusion. For two thousand years we have celebrated this event as the perfect picture of God's love. The Holy Eucharist reveals God's desire, through Christ, to be in communion with us despite everything that tears us apart.

We have carefully preserved and repeated the words and deeds of Jesus on that night. We also have surrounded this perfect picture of God's love with other words and actions that prepare us to celebrate communion in Jesus' name, and share his love with others.

As an Episcopal priest, I have been privileged to celebrate the holy mysteries of God's love as revealed through the Holy Eucharist—in the bright light of day and in the darkness of a candlelight vigil. God's grace has shined through quiet celebrations with one other person and at noisy assemblies of hundreds. I have shared this simple, sacred meal with people for their first time and their last time. We have celebrated with laughter and with tears.

The gifts of communion are as innumerable as the masses of people who have been nourished by this sacrament from every tribe, language, people, and nation for two thousand years. You would surely describe your experiences of these gifts differently than I would. This is

as it should be, because we all follow different journeys to and from this celebration of God's love.

What we have in common (and in communion) is the all-embracing love of God revealed in the story of Jesus Christ. What we hold in particular are our own stories along life's pathways.

The Sacrament of Holy Eucharist is where God's common love story and our particular stories intersect. As surely as the Bible is the testament of God's love, this sacrament is the means by which we consume that love so that it becomes an indistinguishable part of our own souls and bodies. Communion is the gift that sustains us as we live out the next chapter in God's love story.

I want to take you on a journey through this sacrament as we celebrate it in the Episcopal Church using *The Book of Common Prayer*. Even if you are from another tradition in the Church, you will recognize most, if not all, of these elements.

Beginning with the opening words and following through to the final dismissal, I invite you to discover some of the special gifts of communion. I will try to open up these gifts through stories—biblical and personal—which I have shared over the years in pulpits and classrooms. They help point to some of the surprising ways God's love gets communicated to us when we worship, and through us when we love our neighbors as ourselves.

Ultimately, I hope these stories challenge and inspire you to reflect upon your own particular stories which shape the way you encounter the gifts of communion with God and your neighbor. After all, Holy Communion is not just about hearing of someone else's story with Jesus in the past. The gifts of communion just as surely include celebrating our story with God in the present.

I want to share just such a story about an unforgettable gift and celebration I received as a boy. I believe it offers a picture of what life with God and one another is supposed to look like.



<p>People were bringing little children to Jesus in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God</p>
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belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

—Mark 10:13-16

One of my favorite photographs from childhood includes a passel of boys and girls clinging to eight steps on a ladder ascending to a brand new tree house. Freshly-cut pine boards shined like gold amid the happy faces of children.

It was my birthday party, and that tree house was the best present I ever received. The only thing missing was some of our teeth, because we were all about eight years old. When you're eight, you don't let missing teeth stand in the way of a big smile as you experience the joy and wonder of receiving a gift you don't deserve.

If I were making up a parable about the joy and wonder of experiencing the gift of love, it would start like this: “Once upon a time a father built a tree house for his son...” How would your parable about love begin? What is your favorite picture of receiving a gift that was more than you deserved?

Near the end of the New Testament is a letter to the Hebrews. This letter begins with yet another picture of how God's love story has developed over time. The writer explains that while God used to speak to our ancestors through prophets, there is a new means of revelation for us now—a Son who reflects God's glory...a Son who is the exact imprint of God's very being!<sup>1</sup>

Think about that for a moment. We used to have the words of the Law and the prophets, but now we also have the picture of Jesus. As the letter to the Colossians also says, “He is the image of the invisible God...”<sup>2</sup>

It is as if the invisible Source of light and life, mysteriously present in all things, used the light of His countenance to take a picture which captures the truth and beauty of Love in a human face. It is as if our Father in heaven shared a favorite picture of a gift that was more than any of us deserved.

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 1:1-3

<sup>2</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Colossians 1:15

There are lots of theological metaphors from photography that the writers of the ancient Scriptures could not have known. They are metaphors I could not have known without the help of my daughter who shared with me what she learned from a photography class.

It turns out that a brief exposure to light is all that is necessary to create an image. That's all a camera does—it just lets a little light shine in. We do this when we celebrate Holy Communion. One of the gifts of communion is the chance to be still long enough to face the perfect image of God's love, and let a little of that light shine in.

We also know that a picture can only be developed in darkness. In order to make an exact imprint, it takes some time in the dark for the picture to develop. Jesus—the exact imprint of God's being—suffered in the darkness of human cruelty as the full portrait of God's love came into focus. We have been given the courage to persevere in our own valleys of darkness by seeing more clearly that God does not do bad things *to us*. Rather, our God suffers bad things *with us*.

Only after some time in the dark can you bring the print back into the light in order to see all the subtleties. We are blessed with many pictures of Jesus sharing the love of God, welcoming children and adults into his arms and blessing them. We have the subtleties in our own snapshots, too—knots in the golden pine boards and gaps between the baby teeth of radiant smiles. In all these images, we have the gift of joy and wonder in seeing God's love.

In the Sacrament of Holy Eucharist we are invited to take and develop our own pictures of God's love. We open our minds to let the Light shine in. We also gain strength and courage to persevere in the dark, trusting that God is there with us, too. Ultimately, we receive the joy and wonder of God's love, imprinted on our very own hearts in living color.

Here is another twist I have come to see recently. I believe the picture of Jesus—the exact imprint of God—is not for our benefit only. I believe this image is also a blessing for our heavenly Father. This came to me as I realized that while my father built the treehouse for me, he took the picture for himself.

As a father, I can understand why our Father in heaven would build an entire kingdom for his children. God would do it just to delight in those glorious smiles—toothless or not—on our

faces. God would do it to give us more inquiring hearts, more courageous spirits, and more joy and wonder in it all.

In the Sacrament of Holy Eucharist, we join a celebration in which our picture counts. Our presence makes a difference in the picture—as a blessing to our heavenly Father and a blessing to our sisters and brothers, our neighbors as much as ourselves.

Whether the light is shining in or the darkness surrounds us, we are making a family photo album one page at a time. Jesus—the exact imprint of God’s love—is the perfect picture for the cover. Yet, the pages of this scrapbook are meant to be filled with images and stories of this love as we have received it and shared it with one another.

For me, the gift of love is like a picture of a treehouse made of golden pine, filled with smiling faces and the joy and wonder of receiving more than I deserved. It also includes dark nights sleeping on its floor, frightened but not alone. Most of all, it is an imprint I was willing to give back to my father as a picture of my gratitude.

When we celebrate the Holy Eucharist, we are giving thanks for God’s desire to be in communion with us, no matter what. We also are celebrating a perfect picture of God’s love, and our place in that picture, here and now.

As we delight in this gift beyond what we deserve, we have the chance to give back a picture of our gratitude, knowing that this gladdens the very heart of God, our Father. Developing this perfect picture of God’s love is our own way of saying, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Amen.

### **Reflecting on our Story with God**

- ❖ Even before looking back in any photo albums, think about any special photographs that illustrate the gift of God’s love communicated through and with other people.
- ❖ Reflect on celebrations of Holy Eucharist that have been especially meaningful and memorable.

## Celebrating our Story with God

- ❖ Find some favorite pictures of the love of God communicated through the gifts, graces, and mercies of other people.
- ❖ Offer thanks to God for these people, experiences and memories.
- ❖ If possible, write a note of gratitude (perhaps including a copy of the picture) to someone who appears in one of these pictures, letting them know how they are part of one of your favorite images of God's love.

