

## Sour grapes

By [Rebecca Kirkpatrick](#)

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One of the things that I pride myself on as a pastor and parent is that I take the time to prepare my son for worship—pointing out to him changes or additions in the sanctuary that indicate something new or different will be happening in worship, making sure that he has his own bulletin and hymnal so that he can fully participate in worship with his father and me, even pointing out to him things that I think are strange or weird in worship, helping him recognize our worship habits or notice when we stray from them.

Preparing children for special worship and for the sacraments is something that I have [written about before](#), and I have a [favorite post](#) encouraging parents to prepare their children to participate in Ash Wednesday services. **But sometimes I worry that my selective sharing of the benefits of worshiping with children might give the impression that our worship life as a family is full of success and only the rare frustration.**

**This is not the case. at. all.**

So in the spirit of Lent, I thought I would share a story of our epic Ash Wednesday fail from just a few weeks ago.

First, a little background. When we celebrate the sacrament of communion at our church we use sacramental wine, not the Welch's grape juice that I grew up with and that my son has been raised drinking. It only took one swig from the tiny little glass cup the first time we received communion here for my son to swear off the cup.

We walk forward to receive the elements in one of the most unusual communion traditions I have ever experienced. A tray of empty glass cups sits in the center of the aisle, and as you pass it you pick one up. The pastor breaks off a piece of bread and gives it to you to eat immediately. Then you take your tiny cup and hold it out for the communion assistant to fill from a silver chalice that is notched on one side for pouring. Then you drink from your little cup and leave it empty on a tray next to the baptismal font. Having both been the one pouring from the chalice and the one

holding the cup, I can attest to the stressful nature of this method of sharing in the cup as a community.

**My son swearing off communion wine means that I never have to worry about him holding his cup still enough to be poured into. But it also means that I am always a little sad to watch him pass the cup by.**

I will admit that the wine is sour enough that almost every time we share the sacrament I think of the wine mixed with vinegar that the soldiers offered Jesus on the cross—*certainly a far cry from the joyful feast of the people of God, which we are invited to at the table.*

My son walking past the cup has become a habit for us, and I hardly think about it any more.

So now to Ash Wednesday 2015. Our church comes together with a local Anglican church for Ash Wednesday, and this year it was our turn to meet in their sanctuary for worship.

My son has been to his fair share of Ash Wednesday services, so I actually spent more time before the service talking with my parents (who were visiting us), who would actually be receiving ashes for the first time at that service.

We arrived a little early, and I walked my son around the sanctuary to look together at the icons, beautiful frescos, and one of the largest baptismal fonts I have ever seen in my life. We picked up our bulletins, found our seats, and looked at the order of worship service together to orient ourselves for worship.

**I did all of the things I would encourage parents to do.**

I hadn't thought about the fact that we would share the sacrament together, but once we saw the table set for communion, I realized that we would. *It wasn't until the end of the communion liturgy that it crossed my mind that I might need to give my son some instructions about how we would receive the bread and the cup.*

Fortunately we were sitting in the back (like good Presbyterians) and I could see that people were coming forward to kneel at the rail to receive the elements, and that while some people were drinking directly from the cup, others were dipping their bread into the cup.

My son had never knelt for communion at a rail and, I figured, had probably never seen people share a common cup. So I kicked it into gear and made sure he could see that people were coming up and kneeling at the rail, reminding him that I would be there next to him. **Then without really thinking I said, “Some people are drinking from the cup, but you can just dip your bread in and eat that.”**

I think that I realized at some point during our walk to the rail that the Anglicans were likely to also use sacramental wine, and I swear I mentioned this to my son. *But the damage was already done. He heard me clearly say “you can just dip your bread in and eat that.”*

As the priest made his way down our rail, I demonstrated for my son how to hold his hands out to receive the bread. Right on the heels of the priest was our pastor with the cup.

You will remember from my description above that each week at church our pastor gives my son his bread and he walks past her beyond the cup and sits down. While she totally knows that he doesn't take the wine at our church, she had never had the experience of not offering him the sacrament.

**At this point everything shifted into slow motion as she offered the cup to him, and I watched him dip his bread deep in the wine and, without thinking, put it in his mouth.**

**By the time his lips closed his eyes were as big as they can possibly get (which is pretty big), and I could actually see the tears springing from the corners of his eyes.**

I myself had already eaten my wine-infused bread and knew exactly what he was tasting—sour wine.

My son has a pretty sensitive gag reflex, and so I know that both of us at this point were just hoping that he could get it down without losing his dinner. As he began to silently weep, I wrapped my arm around him (still at the rail by the way) and could feel his little shoulders shaking.

Remember that we were seated in the back, which means that we were the last to be served. **I am sure that to the rest of the congregation it looked like my son was having a deeply moving and devout moment of worship as he**

**encountered both the reality of his mortality in the ashes and the gift of grace and redemption in the blood of Christ, when really he was just trying not to throw up.**

Once we finally made it back to our seats, he and I had some difficult words with each other as he accused me of making him take the wine, and I accused him of not paying attention to me when I told him not to take it. Later, when he told the story to his father, who had been teaching a class that evening, he kept saying “She offered it to me; what was I supposed to do?!”

My son does not think the story is as funny as the rest of us do, and likely he will store it away in his memory as one of the times that I was at fault for a bad experience. It won’t be the first or the last.

Truth be told, he has been at fault for plenty of *my* bad worship experiences—complaining, whining, kicking, sighing, talking, refusing to sing, refusing to stand, refusing to pay attention. **I just try to not let them build up or color my ability to return to the pew with him each week.**

I hope that the next time he returns to a rail (probably when he is much older), whether in prayer or to receive the sacrament, he won’t only remember that sour wine and his salty tears, but he will remember that also that his mother was kneeling there next to him.

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