Last week at this time I was on my way home from a seven day Caribbean Cruise. I hesitate to mention such things because I know that not everyone is able to indulge in such luxuries. But this cruise was special. It was my dad’s desire to celebrate his 92nd birthday by taking my sister and her husband, Mary and me on a cruise. So, what can I say? I had to go! Anyway, it was a great trip. And in the midst of it all, I learned a few things.

One thing I learned is that it is possible to provide a context in which a large number of people can live together peacefully for an extended period of time. But this didn’t just happen, of course. The entire cruise ship staff did everything they could to create a sense of peace, well-being, and unity. The food was plentiful and available to everyone on board. Shows, movies, and activities were provided that were open to everyone. Entertainers made jokes that established connections between us. Everyone was treated by the staff with kindness and respect – which, I’m sure wasn’t easy at times. They did everything they could to help us come to a sense that we shared an important connection – we were all on a wonderful journey together. And so, for the most part, we all cooperated with one another and treated each other with kindness.

This experience left me thinking that if such a thing can be accomplished on a boat with 3500 people crammed into it – people of different races, religions, nationalities, and political perspectives, then surely we ought to be able to establish such connectedness and
kindness between all Christians, between all of us who are on board this ship called the church, along with Jesus our captain, who is piloting us through troubled waters to our heavenly destination. While those on board this ship certainly represent different races, nationalities, and political perspectives; and while we do have different approaches to following Jesus – some that are significantly different – all of us who call ourselves Christians are intending to follow the way of self-giving love he taught. We all cherish the cross upon which he died for us. And we all base our blessed hope on his resurrection and ascension into heaven. And since we all believe that in Christ we have been given a way that can bring all people to peace and fullness of life, we have all embraced the mission of sharing this good news with others. These are things that connect us deeply and should lead us to treat each other with love and respect, even though there are many differences between us.

However, often we find Catholics and members of other Christian denominations speaking in ways that are anything but loving and respectful. Rather than speaking in ways that enable us to move forward together as the followers of Jesus, to support and learn from one another about what this really means and how best to do it, we often speak in ways that push us apart. I’m particularly mindful of this on the Feast of Corpus Christi – The Body and Blood of Christ, because so often we speak of the Eucharist in terms of who is right, better, or more perfect, in ways that divide us rather than in ways that help us
to commune more deeply with Christ and with other Christians – even though living in such loving communion was his most fervent prayer for those who would follow him.

Now, please hear me when I say that I’m not suggesting that we Catholics should not hold fast to our beliefs about the Eucharist. I could never suggest this because our understanding of the Eucharist is part of what brought me to the Catholic Church. But what I am moved to say on this Feast of Corpus Christi is that the Eucharist was instituted by Jesus as a way of creating and maintaining a sense of unity among his followers – something which was of immense importance to him.

This is the concern Paul was addressing in the section of First Corinthians that we read from today. In his day, the Eucharist was celebrated in the context of a community meal. The only trouble is that in the Corinthian Church the food at these meals wasn’t being shared. The wealthy were feasting while the poor had nothing to eat or drink. Obviously there was no sense of being deeply connected to one another in Christ. And Paul knew as well as he knew anything that this was not what Jesus had in mind for his people. So he reminded them of the words Jesus used to institute the Eucharist – words which spoke of Jesus’ intention to give himself completely for the sake of all his people.

In the gospel today we heard the familiar story of Jesus feeding of the five thousand. Rather than sending them away, it was his great desire to let them know how much he wanted to be with them and to show them that he could provide for all of them out of his
divine abundance. Now, the Church has always seen this feeding of the multitude as a foreshadowing of the Eucharist – the gift of Christ’s presence and provisioning for all his people – a gift that was given to deepen our communion with one another rather than to divide us.

So, if we are going to be faithful to Christ, it is important that we find ways to speak of the Eucharist that deepens the sense of communion between Christians. And I do think that this is possible. We could begin by acknowledging that all Christians continue to celebrate this holy meal because it was Jesus’ expressed desire that we do this in memory of him. Also, all Christians acknowledge that the celebration of the Eucharist does draw us into deeper communion with Christ and with those who are sharing in it.

In this regard, I’ve been thinking about my experience celebrating the Eucharist when I was a minister in the United Methodist Church some thirty plus years ago. While it is true that most people in my congregations wouldn’t have used the word transubstantiation to describe what happens during the Eucharistic Prayer, I think that most would have said that in the sharing of the bread and the cup they did experience the presence of the risen Christ in a special way and were drawn more deeply into the way of love. They all saw Holy Communion as a special gift of Christ to his people, to provide for them that spiritual food that would help them along life’s way. And to all these things we Catholics can say, Yes! Yes! Yes! Amen! Amen! Amen!
It seems to me that this must be our starting point in speaking with other Christians about the Eucharist. We begin by recognizing our connectedness and celebrating it. This is what creates an environment in which we can honestly speak of our differences and grow towards greater unity.

It’s kind of like this: When we were on our way to the cruise ship we stopped to visit with Mary’s brother for a few days. And other friends and relatives joined us at times. Each time of engagement began with a hug or a handshake, expressions of how good it was to see one another, and questions about the health and well-being of various family members. In other words, we did things that acknowledged the deep connections between us. It was only after this that we got into some heated discussions, as families often do, over matters of religion and politics.

I think this is the way it should be with those of us who make up the extended family of Christ. We begin by acknowledging our deep connectedness in Christ – as people who share in the bread and the cup in memory of him. Then, in love, we can move on to speak of our strong belief that in the Eucharist, Jesus actually becomes bread and wine for us, giving us this gift of his very self in the most intimate and wonderful of ways.