The church I grew up in practiced what was generally called “close” or “closed” communion. That is, only baptized church members were allowed to receive the Lord’s Supper. Even as a child I thought this was a bit mean-spirited and somehow didn’t fit what I knew about eating with family and friends, because on those occasions, whether a regular family meal or a large church supper of some kind, no one was left out and all gathered around as related by birth or friendship. And in the worship wars of recent decades, communion has often been a point of division rather than unity which is counterproductive at best. For in truth, if we can’t gather as one in Christ around the communion table, where else might we be “one in the Spirit?”

There’s a gospel song of a few years ago called “There’s Room at the Cross for You.” It’s a little corny to me and maybe a bit more emotional than I would feel comfortable with, but the chorus goes like this:

There’s room at the cross for you, there’s room at the cross for you, Though millions have come, there’s still room for one, Yes, there’s room at the cross for you.

Our church’s welcome statement, officially adopted by the church a few years ago, may be a bit optimistic. You have it right there on the front of your bulletin:

We’re glad that you have come to St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church today. Whoever you are and wherever you are on your life’s journey, we affirm you with open minds, open hearts, and open arms. We cherish diversity and welcome all who want to grow in a community of faith. Here you can find a place at the table alongside persons from various traditions, ethnicities, viewpoints, and orientations. In the name of Christ, welcome.
This statement sounds nice, but it is not so easy to implement. We are obviously diverse economically, socially, theologically, politically, and in so many other ways, yet by being open to allowing the individual to sort out for her or himself just what one’s relationship to God is and how that is played out on the stage of life, we leave ourselves open for all sorts of controversy as well, and sometimes controversy passes for diversity. And don’t you find it strange that so often in the church, controversy drives so much of what we do or don’t do? How can we claim to be “one in the Spirit” if we cannot be one in much of anything?

One of the biggest mistakes we make about the celebration of communion is to think of being “worthy” or “unworthy” to partake of it. None of us is worthy in ourselves, but the whole point of communion is that it is Christ who has made us worthy by saving us from our sin, namely in saving us from ourselves. And we come to the table at the invitation of Christ who died not only for our sins, but for the sins of the whole world as the Scriptures tell us. In light of that, how then can we deny a place at the table to any who come at Christ’s invitation?

Jarvis DeBerry is one of my favorite columnists. He often has a way of putting things that speaks very directly and forcefully. You may remember that a week or so ago when the old Palace Hotel was being imploded, the folks at the Iberville Housing Project complained about being overlooked in the evacuation plan, and when one young boy was photographed there with his iPad in hand, several people wrote in to the Times Picayune to question why someone living in poverty and in public housing should have an iPad. DeBerry’s question was, “Must poverty mean being disconnected?” It was a question that we all needed to be asked, because sometimes we treat those in poverty as if they have no right to be able to communicate in the same way as those who can so easily afford communication devices. Why are we so prone to deny people a place at the table simply because they cannot afford to contribute much to the spread before us.

Just as importantly, we often seek to deny a place at the table for almost any one or any group that is somehow “different” from us. If we truly mean that “we welcome and affirm” all who come to our table, then we
just might truly experience the unity that only God can create from our diversity. When we label anyone as “unworthy” of coming to the table, we are denying the redemptive work of Christ in the lives of all. Does not that oft-quoted scripture John 3:16 say that “whosoever believes in Christ shall be saved” – no strings attached. Then why will we continue to deny access to any of God’s children? DeBerry has made what I think to be one of the most articulate statements I’ve ever read about discrimination:

“Labels aren’t inherently problematic. For example, I have no problem with your describing me as a black man. Really, it’s perfectly OK for you to see color. The problems come when the label looms larger than the person to whom it’s attached, that is, when it serves to obscure, if not obliterate, everything else about that person’s humanity and personality.”

This week we have had a wonderful experience of Vacation Bible School led by Stephanie Coyne, our Minister to Children and Youth. It was great to have some 30 children running about, playing, singing, learning, interacting with one another and their teachers. These children came from not only the four sponsoring churches, but from our neighborhood and even from parents or grandparents who happened to drive by and saw the sign painted by Clay Cotton. It mattered not a bit to any of us where the children came from, who their parents were, whether they were rich or poor, whether they were well educated or not, whether they had iPads or not, whether their families were candidates for membership in our church or not, only that they were here and their parents trusted us to provide a wholesome, loving, learning environment for their kids – in other words, a place at the table.

Today as we gather around the communion table, we come as invited by Christ and as ones welcomed and affirmed by his work of redemption in us. So, come brothers and sisters, be one in Christ’s Spirit, be one in faith, be one in humility, be one in humanity, be one at the foot of the cross, be one within yourself, be one within this community, be one with all your brothers and sisters not just those just like yourself. Come with joy to receive these symbols, but leave with joy that we are made one by the love of God. AMEN.