

Sermon for April 13, 2017 – Maundy Thursday

1 Corinthians 11:23-28 (Evangelical Heritage Version)

Theme: Holy Communion:

- 1) *What is it?*
- 2) *How does God want us to partake of it?*

²³For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁵In the same way, after the meal, he also took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new testament in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” ²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. ²⁷Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the Lord’s body and blood. ²⁸Instead, let a person examine himself and after doing so, let him eat of the bread and drink from the cup.

Imagine for a moment that you are seriously sick. The doctor prescribes a medicine that – if taken as directed - will heal you. But he warns that this medicine is very strong – any deviation from the directions can bring serious harm and possibly death.

So, what are you going to do? Refuse to take the medicine and allow your illness to get worse? Or are you going to ignore the doctor’s warning and take the medicine however you want? I don’t think you would choose either of those options. Rather, rejoicing in the fact that you have this wonderful medicine that will make you well, you will take it as prescribed – respecting its potency.

In a certain way, the Lord’s Supper can be compared to strong medicine. When received properly, it has the power to give life. When abused, it has the power to kill. Because of this, the LORD wants us to have a healthy understanding of his Sacrament – knowing both what we are receiving and why.

Let us consider these things, under the theme: **Holy Communion:** 1) *What is it?* 2) *How does God want us to partake of it?*

Part One: Holy Communion: What is it?

Imagine belonging to a congregation that celebrated Holy Communion as part of a potluck, instead of during the regular service. Now, in and of itself, there would be nothing wrong with this – except the people at this meal are focusing more on the food than the Sacrament itself. Some people are eating so much that others are left hungry. Not only that, but a few individuals are getting drunk on the wine. Can you imagine celebrating the Lord’s Supper under such circumstances? Neither could the apostle Paul! And yet circumstances like the one I described led Paul to write our sermon text.

The congregation at Corinth celebrated the LORD's Supper as part of a fellowship dinner called the "agape" meal. Now, while there was nothing wrong with this practice in and of itself, their celebration turned sinful when the people began to focus so much on the physical eating and drinking of the dinner, that they all but forgot the substance and purpose of Holy Communion.

This is why Paul goes back to the basics, reminding the Corinthians of what he taught them regarding this Sacrament.

He writes: ²³*For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you.* In other words, Holy Communion is not mere human tradition, developed over time, that we can shape or change to our whims and notions. No, Holy Communion is a sacred act, instituted by our Savior himself.

The Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it (so that he could distribute it to the disciples) and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.

What exactly does Jesus mean with those words? He means that, in with and under the bread, Jesus gave his disciples his actual body, which (in a few hours' time) would be offered up on the cross for their salvation.

But why would Jesus want to give his disciples his body in this sacrament? Because, in giving the disciples the very body he would offer up for their forgiveness, he would assure each individual one of them that he paid for their sins in full. This is why he adds the words: "for you".

Imagine being at a world series finale, and your favorite player signs and gives you the very bat he used to get the run that won the world series for your team – saying "I did this for you." That bat would be pretty special, wouldn't it? Every time you would look at it, you would remember not only how that player won the world series, but how he won it for you – proof of which is the special bat he gave you.

If you can imagine this, then maybe you can begin to understand why Jesus gives you his actual body in Holy Communion. He wants you to remember his love and sacrifice that didn't just win a game, but won your salvation. He did it for you, proof of which is the body he gives you in, with and under the bread.

But how can this be? How could Jesus' body, which was standing right before the disciples, also be in the bread he offered them? How can it be in the little wafer we receive in Communion? Truth be told: No one except God knows how this works. But one thing is certain: God cannot lie. If Jesus promised his body in Holy Communion, we can be sure that it is actually present - just like his blood.

²⁵*In the same way, after the meal he also took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new testament in my blood.*

You know what a “Last Will and Testament” is, right? It is a document that bestows a deceased person’s property to the heir he designates. Jesus was about to die and, by means of his death, win wonderful, costly blessings that he would pass on to his heirs. Christians are his heirs. Do you want proof? It’s found in the cup where - in, with and under the wine - flows the blood that Jesus used to atone for your sins.

Think of it this way. Jesus instituted the LORD’s supper during the Passover meal. That event celebrated how the LORD delivered his people from the angel of death by means of a lamb, whose blood they painted on the door frames of their houses. Seeing the blood of this Lamb, the angel of death “passed over” their house, because God had made a special covenant with them.

God has made a special covenant with you. Jesus is your Passover Lamb. Because He shed his blood for you on the cross, God’s wrath passes over you. And in giving you his actual blood in, with and under the wine of Holy Communion, Jesus also gives you all the benefits the shedding of his blood have earned: the forgiveness of sins, life and eternal salvation. When God looks at you, he sees his Son – with whom you have been united in a very unique way in the sacrament of Holy Communion.

“Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” When Jesus said this, it was as if he was saying: “Do what I did for you now in the future. Take bread and wine and speak the words I spoke when I distributed them to you. And, whenever you eat the bread and drink from the cup, remember that my body and blood is actually present. Remember the blessings I will win for you on the cross – blessings I truly convey to you in this Sacrament together with my body and blood. Be reassured of my love.”

“²⁶For,” St. Paul continues, *“as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”* The purpose of Holy Communion, therefore, is to both publicly proclaim our faith in Christ’s work of atonement and receive the benefits He won for us through his cross. It is a family meal that expresses a special oneness of faith between those partaking of it, as it unites them together in and with Christ.

Part Two: Holy Communion: How does God want us to partake of it?

Because of the special nature of the Sacrament, God wants us to take it seriously. He didn’t institute this meal to be a “take-it-or-leave-it” Church rite - that has no actual impact on us. No, what Jesus said is in the Sacrament is actually in the Sacrament!

“²⁷Therefore,” Paul says, *“whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the Lord’s body and blood.”*

Sinnyng against the actual body and blood of the LORD himself? That sounds pretty serious. And it is! On top of this, whoever comes to Holy Communion in an “unworthy manner” – that is to say, whoever participates in the Lord’s Supper without repenting of their sins, acknowledging that Christ body and blood are truly present, or thinking about what they are doing, sin against Christ.

Now, we may never have gotten drunk at the LORD's table like some of the Corinthians did, but who of us haven't – at one point or another - taken the Lord's Supper without truly thinking about it? Who of us haven't gone to the LORD's table with all sorts of things on our mind except what we are receiving in this Sacrament?

And whenever we do this, we sin against the body and blood of Christ. How so? Because we treat it as a work we are doing for God instead of what it truly is: God's gracious gift to us. We become like ungrateful children to whom a precious gift is given, but only open it because they feel like they are doing the giver a favor – and don't really care about the gift itself. This is what we do with the forgiveness, life and salvation Jesus offers us in Holy Communion if we don't think about what we are doing, and readily welcome the gift God offers us in this sacrament.

To prevent this, the apostle Paul advises: *let a person examine himself and after doing so, let him eat of the bread and drink from the cup.* What does Paul mean by this? He wants you to examine your heart. Do you truly acknowledge your sinfulness, or do you think that you are a good person who doesn't really need the forgiveness Christ offers you all that much? If you think this way, stay away from Communion! Why? Because you are turning the Sacrament into a work you are doing for God, instead a gift he graciously gives you. You become like the person who receives a gift by saying, "I'll do *you* a favor and take this gift off your hands, even though I really have no need for it."

Yes, it is of the utmost importance that you recognize your sinfulness before coming to Holy Communion, and repent – that is turn away from sin and to Christ in faith for forgiveness. But woe to the person who comes to Holy Communion with an impenitent heart – who thinks to himself, "I know what I am doing is wrong, but I don't care. God will forgive me in this Sacrament, then I can go on living however want." Such a person will not receive Christ's body and blood for forgiveness, but for judgement – because the almighty God knows all. He can't be mocked.

No, the person alone is properly prepared who acknowledges his need for forgiveness, repents of all sin, and trusts that Jesus' actual body and blood is present to give us the forgiveness, life and salvation that Christ won for us through his cross.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, Holy Communion is truly powerful medicine, meant to heal your sin sick souls. Don't be afraid of it, rather receive it in repentance and faith – for it is the LORD's special expression of his love and kindness to you. Come to his table humble, weak and repentant. Receive the very gifts Jesus used to win your salvation; and then leave the communion table fully forgiven and at peace with God – knowing that your LORD loves you, and will keep his promise to safely deliver you through this life, home to himself in heaven. Amen.