

Sermon for April 6, 2023 – Maundy Thursday

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

Theme: Holy Communion:

- 1) What is it?
- 2) How does the LORD 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 you are seriously sick. Your doctor prescribes a medicine that will heal you – but only if taken as directed. He also warns that deviating from his directions can bring serious harm and possibly death.

So, what are you going to do? Will you refuse to take the medicine and allow your illness to get worse? Will you ignore the doctor’s warning and take the medicine however you want? I don’t think you would choose either of those options. Instead, you will take it as prescribed – respecting its potency and happy that you have this life-saving medicine.

In a certain way, the Lord’s Supper can be compared to strong medicine. When appropriately received, it has the power to heal. When abused, it can kill. Because this is the case, the LORD wants us to have a healthy understanding of his Sacrament – knowing what we are receiving and why. Let us consider these things under the theme: **Holy Communion:** 1) What is it? 2) How does the LORD 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 an after-worship fellowship meal instead of during the regular service. Unfortunately, people at this meal focus more on the food than on the Sacrament itself. Some people eat so much that others are left hungry. Not only that, but a few individuals are in the habit of getting drunk at this gathering. Can you imagine celebrating the Lord’s Supper under such circumstances? Neither could the apostle Paul, yet circumstances like the one I described led him to write our sermon text!

The congregation at Corinth celebrated the LORD's Supper as part of a fellowship dinner called an "agape" meal, that is to say: a love 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. That is why the apostle Paul reminded them of the basics he previously 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 a mere human tradition we can shape or change to our whims and notions. No, Holy Communion is a sacred act instituted by our Saviour 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 did Jesus mean by those words? He meant that in, with, and under the bread, Jesus gave his disciples his actual body that he would offer upon the cross for their salvation in a few hours.

But why would Jesus want to give his disciples his body in this sacrament? To assure each of them individually that he paid for their sins in full. That is why he adds the words: "*for you.*"

Imagine being the child of a soldier who went off to war. When your dad returns, he gives you his combat uniform, saying: "I want you to know I was constantly thinking of you while fighting. I wanted to make sure that you would always remain free and safe. Every sacrifice I made on the battlefield, I made for you." That uniform would be something special, wouldn't it? It would be a constant reminder of your father's self-sacrificing love that he offered to keep you and your family safe.

If you can imagine a scenario like 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 physical freedom but everlasting salvation from sin, death and the devil's power. Everything Jesus endured, he endured for you. He gives you His risen and living body in Holy Communion to remind you of that.

But how is that possible? How could Jesus' body, standing right before the disciples' eyes, 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 sure: God cannot lie. Therefore, since 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 heirs he designates. Jesus was about to die and, through his death, win

wonderful, costly blessings that he would pass on to his heirs. We, Christians, are his heirs. Do you want proof? It's found in the cup where, in, with, and under the wine, flows the blood 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. 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 on the cross have earned: the forgiveness of sins, life, and eternal salvation. When God the Father looks at you, he sees his Son with whom you are united uniquely 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 are 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 assured 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."* Another purpose of Holy Communion, in addition to assuring us of our salvation, is to publicly proclaim our faith in Christ's work of saving us and receive the benefits He won for us through his cross. It is also a family meal that expresses a unique oneness of faith among those who partake of it.

Part Two: Holy Communion: How does the LORD 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, he wants us to take to heart everything he said concerning this 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."*

Sinning against the actual body and blood of the LORD? That sounds serious. And it is! On top of that, 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's body and blood are truly present, or doesn't think about what they are doing) sins against Christ.

Now, we may never have gotten drunk at the LORD's table as some of the Corinthians did, but who of us can claim that they have never taken the Lord's Supper without genuinely thinking about

it? Yes, even taking Holy Communion unthinkingly is a sin against Christ's body and blood. How so? Because doing so treats it as a work we do for God instead of what it truly is: God's gracious gift to us.

To prevent this, the apostle Paul commands: *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 assess your heart. Do you honestly 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 believe the latter, stay away from Communion! Why? Because you would be turning the Sacrament into a work you are doing for God instead of a gift he graciously gives you.

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 so I can go on living however I want.” Such a person will not receive Christ's body and blood for forgiveness but for judgment. Why? Because the almighty God knows everything. He will not allow himself to be mocked.

Who, then, is the person God wants to come to Holy Communion? He invites those who believe His Word; that is to say, everyone who trusts everything the Bible says about our sinfulness, Christ's atoning sacrifice for our behalf, and what he says is in the Sacrament – even if it defies all human understanding.

“But,” someone might ask, “what if I am weak in my faith and struggle? Should I stay away until I feel stronger?” No, come and receive that sacrament knowing that Jesus gives it to strengthen our faith. Think of it this way, is a medicine made for the sick or the healthy? For the sick!

In the same way, the sacrament of Communion is also meant for those who spiritually struggle and are weak. It is genuinely potent medicine meant to heal your sin-sick souls. Don't be afraid of it; instead, receive it in repentance and faith – for it is the LORD's unique 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, 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.