

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is the night in which our Lord was betrayed: Holy Thursday night. Later this night, he will be arrested by the guards in the Garden of Gethsemane. But this liturgy remembers the early evening events of that holy night, in the upper room, where Jesus is gathered with his disciples. In that upper room gathering, Jesus lingered with the Twelve disciples and did two things: (1) He washed the feet of his disciples and gave them the commandment that they were to love one another with a love that reflected his own for them. And (2) he instituted the Blessed Sacrament of the Holy Communion.

In this sermon, I want to focus on the second of these deeds: the Holy Communion. My text is from our Epistle Reading: 1 Corinthians 11. St. Paul writes this:

²³For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that 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." (1 Corinthians 11:23-24, RSV)

My theme is this: The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy Communion is meant to both *comfort* our souls and to *stir them up*. The Blessed Sacrament seeks to calm us concerning sin and to agitate us concerning holiness of life. Let me take these two in turn. First, the Sacrament comforts us. Second it agitates us with a holy restlessness.

First, the comfort of the sacrament. Martin Luther found comfort in both Christ's *command* concerning the Blessed Sacrament and in Christ's *promise* concerning the Sacrament.

There was nothing sentimental about Luther when it came to whether or not the Church should observe the sacrament and whether or not Christians should commune. He felt that there was no option here. Jesus said, "Do this!" "Do this in remembrance of me." And as far as Luther was concerned, that settles the matter. The Church and the disciples face the dominical command to observe the sacrament. The only question is whether we mean to obey.

As for Luther, he was glad for the command to communion. In fact, if it were not for that command, Luther worried as to whether he would have enough nerve to come to the Holy Communion, for he doubted whether he was worthy to come into the presence of Jesus. And I understand this worry about worthiness. I think many of us grieve that we fall short of the glory of God and wonder whether we are worthy to communion. But listen to how Luther sorts this out:

I, too, am just now learning to comprehend that access to the Sacrament is not based on our worthiness, but that instead I come as an *unworthy* person who *cannot* be worthy. God protect me from my worthiness! Indeed I would like to be worthy, but that is an art which I cannot achieve. For this reason I

come standing on your Word, O Lord, and I seek holiness and righteousness from you.¹

Likewise for you and me: if we cannot be worthy, at least we can be obedient and “do this” in remembrance of Jesus.

But even if there were no command to communion, Luther felt that we should hasten to the Blessed Sacrament for the sake of the promise granted to us there. In the Sacrament, our risen Lord Jesus says to us, one by one: This is my body, given *for you*. This is my blood, shed *for you*.” These words are sheer comfort. These words mean that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are not meant simply for Peter, James, John, Mary, and the saints, but also for you! And for me!

It is a wonder and a humbling thing to ponder that Jesus should die for me, for I am nothing special in this world -- just a sinner among other sinners. I am unworthy that any person should die for me, let alone that Jesus should die for me. There is no comparison here, no equality. He is innocent and I am guilty. He is wholly good in nature, while I am a weary mixture of good and bad, and would be entirely bad if not for God’s grace. He is God, my Maker, while I am simply a fallen creature.

But the thing is, I stand in need of help, and Luther wants us to understand that that is exactly what God offers us in the Holy Communion. Our conscience is sometimes troubled, our hands are not always clean, and our chances of heaven would be poor if it were simply up to us. With justice all of reality could well pass judgment on us and in one great chorus declare: Sinner! But Jesus comes to us in the Blessed Sacrament and pronounces over us, Saved!

The great delight of the Holy Communion for Luther is that Jesus uses the Sacrament to comfort the afflicted soul. Things go wrong in life, but at least we are permitted to rise up from the Communion rail Sunday by Sunday and start over again, knowing that the Lord of all creation has met us in the Blessed Sacrament and claimed us as his own, along with his promise of forgiveness and life everlasting.

So, that is the first gift of the Holy Communion: it comforts the poor sinner and lets us start anew.

Now, let’s look at the second gift of the Holy Communion: it should agitate us toward holiness of life.

I mean, we would have to be some kind of a stick or a stone to remain unmoved by what Jesus has done for us. And what he has done for us becomes especially clear in the Holy Communion. Why, it is as if in the Holy Communion, Jesus insists that more chairs be added to the table. There sits Peter, who will deny Jesus. There sits Judas, who will betray Jesus. There sit the rest of the disciples, who will all abandon him and flee away when the going gets tough. And now, in the Blessed Sacrament, it is as Jesus insists that the Table be expanded and that more chairs be added so that there is room for you and me too.

After all, we are kin to the Twelve, both in our weakness and in our privilege. We are weak in that we too often fall into sin. And we are privileged in that Jesus calls us “friends.”

¹ *The 1529 Holy Week and Easter Sermons of Dr. Martin Luther*, translated by Irving L. Sandberg (Concordia Publishing House: Saint Louis, 1998) pg. 75.

So, Jesus calls for more chairs at the Table. We take our place at that Table, as surely as we get up soon from our pews to come to this Communion rail.

And there at the Table, Jesus includes *us* in what he is about to do: He is about to surrender his life that we might have life. He is about to yield up both his body and his blood for us. He says so to us, one by one: This is my body given for you. This is my blood shed for you.

How can we remain calm before such love? Does it not tug at our hearts? Does not the sacrifice of Jesus for us bid us toward something of his spirit? Can we contribute so little to the world when he contributed his life for the world?

And then let us note the liturgical language that draws us forward into the pattern of Christ's sacrifice. We begin with the Offering Prayer. In that prayer, we offer everything to the Father, including ourselves, just as Jesus did for us:

Merciful Father, we offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us--*our selves*, our time, and our possessions, signs of your gracious love. Receive them for the sake of him who offered himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Then notice the location where we place ourselves as we stand before the almighty Father: we stand "in him," in Christ. We seek no other shelter than him:

Through him, with him, *in him*, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honor and glory is yours, almighty Father, now and forever. Amen

And finally, think of the Post-Communion prayer which speaks of conforming ourselves to Christ:

Let us pray. Almighty God, you gave your Son both as a sacrifice for sin and a model of the godly life. Enable us to receive him always with thanksgiving, and to *conform our lives to his*; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This is the holy agitation of which I spoke earlier. The Blessed Sacrament seeks that we should become Christ-like. The ecumenical theologians of the International Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue puts the matter this way:

The Lord present among us wants to draw us into the movement of his life.²

Also,

Thus is rehearsed in the Lord's Supper what is practiced in the whole Christian life.³

² International Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue, *The Eucharist*, 17-18, referred to in Jenson, *Unbaptized God*, page 37.

³ International Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue, *The Eucharist*, 46-47, referred to in Jenson, *Unbaptized God*, page 37.

The Lord's Supper is rich in meaning far beyond what I can imagine. Yet, I think I have perceived these three things: (1) Our Lord Jesus gives us a gracious command that we are to "do this" in remembrance of him, whether or not we are worthy of him. (2) In the Blessed Sacrament, Jesus comforts our hearts by promising us the forgiveness of sins. And (3) the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross for us should move us toward fervent gratitude and conformity to his sacrificial love for others, for it is a love that give us hope, and it a love that our neighbors need us to share with them.

To Christ who bore our sins on the tree be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.