

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/13/2011, Midweek Lent 5: Holy Communion
Matthew 26:26-28, 1 Corinthians 11:18-29

PRAYER OF THE DAY

P Almighty God, our redeemer, in our weakness we have failed to be your messengers of forgiveness and hope in the world. Renew us by your Holy Spirit, that we may follow your commands and proclaim your reign of love; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

HOLY SCRIPTURE

The Institution of the Sacrament..... Matthew 26:26-28, RSV

[Note from Pastor Fryer: The story of our Lord's institution of the Blessed Sacrament is told in all three of what are called "the Synoptic Gospels": Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The words of institution are similar across these Gospels.]

²⁶Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." ²⁷And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; ²⁸for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

Holy Communion as the Sacrament of Unity1 Corinthians 11:18-29, RSV

[Note from Pastor Fryer: In St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, the apostle is addressing a contentious, fractured congregation -- a congregation that does not seem bothered by its disunity. St. Paul is troubled, for example, by the reports he has received of the Corinthian Christians dividing themselves up according to whichever teacher they champion:

¹²*What I mean is that each one of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ."*

¹³*Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Corinthians 1:12-13, RSV)*

Likewise, St. Paul is troubled by the willingness of the Corinthian Christians to resort to the pagan courts in order to settle their differences:

¹*When one of you has a grievance against a brother, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? ²Do you not know that*

the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? ³Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, matters pertaining to this life! ⁴If then you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who are least esteemed by the church? ⁵I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no man among you wise enough to decide between members of the brotherhood, ⁶but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? ⁷To have lawsuits at all with one another is defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? (1 Corinthians 6:1-7, RSV)

And now, in this evening's reading about the Lord's Supper, St. Paul is distressed about a careless elitism within the Corinthian congregation. As best I can figure it, the issue seems to be coffee hour down in the undercroft. It appears that well-to-do Corinthian Christians were sharing meals together with one another in the church, but were excluding lowly Christians from these meals. St. Paul argues that such divisions are inconsistent with the Lord's Supper, and that we should learn from the Lord's Supper to honor the "body of Christ," by which he means two things: both the Blessed Sacrament and the church. In fact, St. Paul says that those who are not willing to recognize the dignity of all Christians, both rich and poor, are placing themselves in jeopardy through their failure to discern the body of Christ. Here, then, is the teaching of St. Paul from 1 Corinthians 11:

¹⁸For, in the first place, when you assemble as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and I partly believe it, ¹⁹for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. ²⁰When you meet together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. ²¹For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk. ²²What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not. 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." ²⁵In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant 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. ²⁷Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹For any one who eats and drinks *without discerning the body* eats and drinks judgment upon himself.

Hymn before the sermon, LBW 212, *Let Us Break Bread Together*

SERMON

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

Our subject this evening is the sacrament of Holy Communion. Let me discuss three matters with you about this sacrament -- one practical, one theological, and one spiritual. The practical matter could be called “ecumenical courtesy and integrity.” The theological matter is the doctrine of “the real presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament.” And the spiritual matter is “the benefits of Holy Communion.”

In this first section, I want to discuss communing in other churches. You travel, sometimes on business, sometimes on vacation. And so it is that from time to time you find yourself in a town where you do not know any of the churches or any of the clergy. Two questions arise then: Where can you worship? And where can you commune?

These are not necessarily the same question. Our family, for example, when we travel we sometimes worship in Catholic churches. That’s because experience has taught us that, by and large, the Catholic Church can be counted on to treasure the Word of God. And after all, that’s why we go to Church. On Lutheran grounds, the Word of God is the true treasure and heart of the Church. Catholic Churches tend to preserve the reading of the Bible and honorable preaching on it, and they celebrate the sacraments in beautiful ways. So if we do not know anything about the churches in a town, we sometimes choose a Catholic Church.

But the problem is that we are not in communion with the Catholic Church. That is the great heartbreak of the Sixteenth Century. The Catholic Church excommunicated Martin Luther, and has never yet changed her mind about that.

So, I sometimes worship in the Catholic Church, but I do not commune in the Catholic Church. I suppose I could go forward to the Altar, *as if* I were Catholic, and many a goodhearted Catholic priest would go ahead and give me the Blessed Sacrament if I hold out my hands. But I do not do that. It is part of what I am calling “ecumenical courtesy and integrity.” We Lutherans are not in communion with the Catholic Church, and I think we should be fair and square and honest about that. But I do want, somehow, to be part of the Body of Christ gathered in that place, so my personal practice is to go forward for the Sacrament, but pause before the priest, and cross my arms on my chest, thereby signaling that I cannot receive the sacrament, but would be glad to receive a blessing. That’s how I do it, and I am satisfied with that.

What churches can we commune in? Let me review our situation here at Immanuel. For most of our history, starting in the midst of the Civil War, in 1863, we were a Lutheran Church Missouri Synod congregation. But now, since 1988, we have been removed from the roster of Missouri Synod congregations and are part of the other main part of Lutheranism here in America. We are part of what is called the “ELCA” - the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Historically, the Missouri Synod is reluctant to enter into relationships of full communion with any other church body. The ELCA, on the other hand, is in full

communion with six other denominations. That means that you are free to commune in these churches. Here they are, in chronological order of entering into full communion:

Full Communion Partners

<http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Office-of-the-Presiding-Bishop/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations/Full-Communion-Partners.aspx>

“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.” ~ Ephesians 2:19

One of the goals the ELCA pursues is a model of ecumenism called “*full communion*.” Currently, the ELCA shares full communion relationships with six churches.



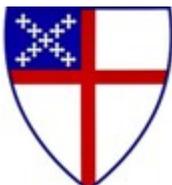
Presbyterian Church (USA)
Full Communion Partner since 1997.



Reformed Church in America
Full Communion Partner since 1997.



United Church of Christ
Full Communion Partner since 1997.



The Episcopal Church
Full Communion Partner since 1999.



The Moravian Church
Full Communion Partner since 1999.



The
United
Methodist
Church

United Methodist Church
Full Communion Partner since 2009.

To be in “full communion” with another church means that we have “pulpit and altar fellowship” with that church. So we can commune in each other’s church and clergy can preach in each other’s pulpits without special permission from the bishop.

Notice that we are not in communion with the Catholic Church, nor with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. Pastor Thomas Green, for example, is scheduled to preach here at Immanuel for Good Friday evening. But he is a Missouri Synod pastor, so I had to officially request permission from Bishop Rimbo for him to preach here at Immanuel, which was granted.

So, that’s about ecumenical courtesy and integrity.

Next, a matter of doctrine: Lutherans join Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox Church in teaching the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament. As I have mentioned before, some of the most important and creative theological work Martin Luther did was in defense of catholic teaching on the sacraments. In this, Luther opposed radical reformers like Ulrich Zwingli.

But, in some sense, Luther’s massive books in defense of the real presence of Christ can be reduced to a real simple argument: Jesus said this *is* his body, and Luther means to take our Lord at his word. Jesus said that the bread *is* his body -- not “symbolizes his body” or “puts us in mind of his body,” or “helps us to remember his body,” but simply *is* his body. Here is a quote along these lines from Luther’s Large Catechism:

With this Word [“this is my body”] you can strengthen your conscience and declare: “Let a hundred thousand devils, with all the fanatics, come forward and say, ‘How can bread and wine be Christ’s body and blood?’ etc. Still I know that all the spirits and scholars put together have less wisdom than the divine Majesty has in his littlest finger. Here is Christ’s word: ‘Take, eat, this is my body.’ ‘Drink of this, all of you, this is the New Testament in my blood,’ etc. Here we shall take our stand and see who dares to instruct Christ and alter what he has spoken.

So, that is an important point of doctrine: Lutherans agree with Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox on the real presence of Christ in the sacrament.

Now we come to the benefits of the sacrament. What are the benefits? Something very important to us, both now and for all eternity: I am speaking of the “forgiveness of sins.” Listen to Luther on the power and benefits of the sacrament:

Now we come also to its power and benefit, for which purpose the sacrament was really instituted. For it is most necessary that we know

what we should seek and obtain there. This is clear and easily understood from the words just quoted: “This is my body and blood, given and poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins.” That is to say, in brief, that we go to the sacrament because there we receive a great treasure, through and in which we obtain the forgiveness of sins. Why? Because the words are there, and they impart it to us!

Luther believed that Christians ought to be grateful for the Blessed Sacrament and to gladly seek it. He agreed with the old teaching of the Church that the Lord’s Supper is “food for the soul”

Therefore, it is appropriately called food of the soul, for it nourishes and strengthens the new creature. For in the first instance, we are born anew through baptism. However, our human flesh and blood, as I have said, have not lost their old skin. There are so many hindrances and attacks of the devil and the world that we often grow weary and faint and at times even stumble. Therefore the Lord’s Supper is given as a daily food and sustenance so that our faith may be refreshed and strengthened and that it may not succumb in the struggle but become stronger and stronger. For the new life should be one that continually develops and progresses.

Do you need this food for your soul? Luther gives this blunt answer:

Suppose you say, “What shall I do if I cannot feel this need or if I do not experience hunger and thirst for the sacrament?” Answer: For those in such a state of mind that they cannot feel it, I know no better advice than that they put their hands to their bosom to determine whether they are made of flesh and blood. If you find that you are, then for your own good turn to St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians and hear what are the fruits of your flesh: “Now the works of the flesh (he says) are obvious: adultery, fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, murder, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.”

For this reason, if you cannot feel the need, at least believe the Scriptures. They will not lie to you, since they know your flesh better than you yourself do. Yes, and St. Paul concludes in Romans 7[:18], “For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh.” If St. Paul speaks this way of his own flesh, let us not wish to be better or holier. But the fact that we do not feel it is all the worse, for it is a sign that ours is a leprous flesh, which feels nothing although it rages with disease and gnaws away at itself. As we have said, even if you are so utterly dead in sin, at least believe the Scriptures, which pronounce this judgment upon you. In short, the less you feel your sins and infirmities,

the more reason you have to go to the sacrament and seek its help and remedy.

And if you should feel unworthy of the sacrament, Luther says this:

But those who earnestly desire grace and comfort should compel themselves to go and allow no one to deter them, saying, "I would really like to be worthy, but I come not on account of any worthiness of mine, but on account of your Word, because you have commanded it and I want to be your disciple, regardless of my worthiness."

Let me end with a lesson I try to teach the little children in First Communion Instruction: When you get up from your pew and come forward for the Holy Communion, try to bear in mind what you have just heard about Jesus in the Bible story, and then be pleased to think that you are about to come into the presence of this very same Jesus Christ.

You and I face Holy Week now. Soon we will ponder the love of our Lord Jesus and the heartbreaking suffering he bore for you, for me. When you get up from your pew, then, to go the Holy Communion, try to take it to heart that you are coming into the presence of this same crucified and risen One. If you suffer, he too knows about suffering. If you love, he too knows about love. And he has loving words for you: this is my body, this is my blood, *for you*, for the forgiveness of sins.

To this loving Lord be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.