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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/21/2011, Maundy Thursday
Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, John 13:1-17, 31b-35
Neither Fear nor Nonchalance before the Blessed Sacrament

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

Hear again the solemn words of St. Paul from this evening's Epistle Reading, from First Corinthians, Chapter Eleven. The Apostle speaks of the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. He starts off this way:

For 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)

The great dramatic scenes of this evening's liturgy are the Footwashing and the Stripping of the Altar at the end -- especially perhaps, the Stripping of the Altar, when our church lights gradually dim, the things in the chancel are removed one by one, and we leave the church in silence, pondering our Lord's arrest and nighttime interrogation. In those wee hours of interrogation, those with power robbed Jesus of his -- depriving him of dignity, as if it were possible, as if stripping him of his clothes, dressing him in kingly robes and a crown of thorns, mocking him and spitting upon him could really diminish his majesty.

So, these are the especially moving and eye-catching parts of this evening's liturgy: the Footwashing and the Stripping of the Altar.

But in my sermon now I want to pass over these two and linger with our weekly Sacrament -- the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. We are familiar with this Sacrament in the sense that we often celebrate it. And yet our *familiarity* with the Sacrament does not quite amount to thorough *understanding* of it. We cannot hear St. Paul's description of the Sacrament and then toss the book in the corner, as if we have mastered it. As Luther said about the Catechism as a whole, we can also say about the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar: we must ever remain children before the Sacrament and study it, and we should gladly do so.

We have seen this before. There stands our beloved, my wife, Carol, for example. I am familiar with her, yet she ever remains a wonderful mystery to me, with surprises and delights one after another, even after all these years. So it is with the Blessed Sacrament: We are familiar with it, yet it forever remains rich in meaning, surpassing our ability to comprehend it. The Blessed Sacrament, I say, is always worthy of sermons and adoration. This is the night, Maundy Thursday -- the night in which our Lord was betrayed, the night in which he instituted the Blessed Sacrament. So, let us consider the Sacrament this evening, and in considering it, let our hearts be filled with gratitude.

My theme in this sermon is that we should seek the middle ground between two possible attitudes toward the Blessed Sacrament. I mean, terror of the Sacrament, on the hand, and casualness before the Sacrament on the other. What we need lies somewhere between fear and flippancy. Our aim should be more toward joy and gratitude. So, the plan of my sermon is to preach against the two extremes and to praise the central virtues. That is, let's stand against both terror of the Sacrament and nonchalance toward it, and let's seek joy and gratitude for the sacrament.

First, let's speak of terror of the Sacrament. When I was a boy, I worshiped in a church that seldom celebrated the Holy Communion. It was a little Pilgrim Holiness Church down on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. I have traveled many a mile and many a year since those days, but I still bear affection for my childhood church. The people of the church were not lazy. They were hardworking farmers, for the most part. If they shied away from the Blessed Sacrament, it wasn't because they felt they had something more important to do with their time. No, it was Sunday and they were ready to worship and to rest, as they understood the Commandment to require of them. The issue, then, was not time. They had time for the Blessed Sacrament. They just did not have peace in their hearts for the Sacrament.

Fact is, they were frightened of the Holy Communion, and that for two reasons: First, they read and loved their Bibles and they knew that there is such a thing as "eating and drinking to one's own judgment." St. Paul wrote about that to the Corinthians:

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. (1 Corinthians 11:27-29, RSV)

They were humble folk, my dear mothers and fathers in the Lord in that Pilgrim Holiness congregation, and they were not all that confident about themselves that they "discerned the body" of Christ in the Holy Communion. So, to play it safe, they shied away from the sacrament, lest they eat and drink judgment upon themselves.

But I do believe there was an even more profound reason they tried to avoid the Holy Communion, and that was simply that they did not feel worthy to come into the presence of the Lord Jesus they adored. I think that you and I feel that way too sometimes, especially now, during Holy Week, when we are filled with sorrow as we imagine the suffering Christ for us revealed on the cross. Many of us find it easy to sing the spiritual "What wondrous love is this, oh, my soul, oh, soul."

So the folks back home felt unworthy to come into the presence of Christ. The result was that years went by before we celebrated the Lord's Supper. I remember that one year, the pastor resolved that we should celebrate the sacrament that year.

He said we would do it on Easter Sunday. So we all brooded about it, and then, quietly, the congregational leaders met with the pastor and begged him not to offer the Holy Communion that year also, which is how it went.

Now, I think the folks back then were right to feel humble before Holy Communion. It is just that their theology did not sufficiently lift up something that Martin Luther often lifted up. It was the way of Luther to point to God's *commandments* and to take delight in them, because he figured that if God commands something, then who are we to say no, even if we should feel unworthy? So, Luther could point to what is called "the salutary command" of our Lord Jesus concerning the Blessed Sacrament. Jesus said "*Do this*. Do this in remembrance of me." He didn't say, "Do this if you are worthy of me." If we had to be worthy, then the folks back home were probably right: Each of us should probably stay away from the sacrament. But we come to the sacrament, though unworthy, because Jesus bids us come. If we are unworthy of our Lord, nonetheless, at least we can try to obedient to our Lord.

So, that's one error. We do not need to be terrified of the Holy Communion. Our Saviour is there and bids come, and so we should come, "just as I am, without one plea."

The other error goes in the opposite direction. That is the error of arrogance toward the Blessed Sacrament. We sometimes forget what a wonder it is to come before the One who died for us. We get into a mood of nonchalance about it all. We hear the words "broken and shed for you," but the reality to which those words refer does not quite reach our hearts. So we get up from the pew and come forward to the Lord's Supper, as we ought to do, and yet we are not doing it in the right spirit. We might be thinking about business or school or brunch afterwards, and so it is that we miss out on the wonder of it all. In the process, we undervalue Jesus and we fail to receive the spiritual strength we should from the Holy Communion.

I have a clergy friend who once told me how alarmed he was by some of his people who wanted to take over the liturgy and make it more appealing. The thing that troubled the pastor was not the aesthetics of it all. It was not that his restless young people liked guitars and he did not. No, the problem was that the pastor felt that some of his people were in danger of losing their feel for the majesty of the Holy Communion. How could they say, he wondered, that the mass was boring to them? Did they not know that in the Holy Communion that were being transported to Golgotha, to the very foot of the old rugged cross? Had they stopped listening to the words of Christ, how he looked at each of them and said, "This is my body, this is my blood, broken and shed *for you*"? How could they possibly be bored by that? How could they failed to be moved by that?

Let us, then, seek a middle way between fear of the sacrament and casualness toward it. All of the things we hear about our Lord Jesus this week, from this agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, to his Crucifixion, to his Resurrection: all of these awesome things become personal, focused, and addressed to you, to me, in the Blessed Sacrament. The things of his Holy Week: they were not done just for the Twelve, nor simply for the Apostles, the martyrs, and the saints, but also were

done for you, for me. When you get up from your pew and walk forward to the Holy Communion, picture yourself walking straight into the very communion of saints, with angels and archangels, seraphim and cherubim all around, with apostles, martyrs, and saints cheering you on, and he who is Lord of them all waiting to say that he did it all for you! I mean our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.