

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/17/2014, Maundy Thursday
1 Corinthians 11:23-26
The New Covenant

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

My sermon this evening is about our Lord's institution of the Holy Communion and the new covenant he thereby forged between God and us.

My text is from our Epistle Lesson, from First Corinthians 11. The words of Saint Paul I am about to read are dear to us and familiar to us. Indeed, I repeat them every Sunday when we celebrate the Holy Communion, and I will be repeating this evening too, the good Lord willing. Saint Paul is speaking about the "new covenant" and the Blessed Sacrament. The words go this way:

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." (1 Corinthians 11:25, RSV)

MARTIN LUTHER AND JOHN BUGHENHAGEN

Let me begin this sermon by talking about a passing event in the life of Martin Luther and his pastor, John Bugenhagen. Martin Luther in his day was like David Lotz in our day: that is, Martin Luther was a priest/professor. His fulltime vocation was that of a theologian – same as Pastor Lotz, who is an eminent church historian. But like our Pastor Lotz, Martin Luther was more than an academic person: he was also a believing Christian. And because he was a believing Christian, he went to church. In Luther's case, he was a member of St. Mary's Church in Wittenberg, and John Bugenhagen was his pastor. Being no fool, Bugenhagen loved Luther and used him as much as possible in the conduct of his ministry.

Well, one day Bugenhagen and Luther were distributing the Blessed Sacrament, and to their deep distress, they spilled the wine on the dress of a lady at the Communion rail. She bumped against the chalice, thereby splashing some of the consecrated wine. Bugenhagen and Luther put their heads together and formed a plan. First step: they seem to have bought the woman's dress. Lutheran theologian Arthur Carl Piepkorn gives this report on what they did next:

After the celebration Luther had the affected portion of the lining of the jacket cut out and burned, along with the wood

that he had had shaved from the part of the choir stall upon which the contents of the chalice had likewise been splashed.¹

Apparently they hired a carpenter to take his plane to the chancel and to shave away the wood that had the consecrated wine on it. Then, with prayers, I am sure, they burned the cloth and they burned the wood. They had done what they could to show reverence for the body and blood of our Lord Jesus.

If I fumble at the Communion rail and drop the host, I immediately pick it up and eat it. I am not saying that other pastors or seminarians should do the same thing. But I bet there are a good number of pastors who do the same thing I do. They try not to make a fuss about it. They just quietly take the dropped host and eat it.

Why? Why is there such reverence for the Blessed Sacrament? Answer, because of what Jesus did on that night when he was betrayed. Somehow, through his institution of the Holy Communion, Jesus blended us in with his own good standing before his heavenly Father. He incorporated you and me in the covenant he faithfully fulfilled with the Father. His was the faithfulness and his was the obedience. But in the Holy Communion, he wove us into his good relationship with the Father as if we were faithful and obedient too.

DAVID YEAGO

To help explain this, I would like to hearken back to a sermon preached by theologian David Yeago right here at Immanuel. Back in the year 2000, David Yeago stood here at this sacred desk and preached about Jeremiah's promise of a "new covenant." That sermon contained this paragraph – the one I have long desired to explore:

A covenant is a bond between two parties, a basis for living together, charter for community. If Jesus were just an unusually good person who kept the commandments, there would be a bond between him and God, but that would not be a charter for community between God and us. How does Jesus in his dying found a new way for God and human beings to live together? In the words he spoke at the upper room, Jesus does more than interpret his death; he does more even than to devote himself to God's will. Notice just how he acts out his acceptance of death: he does not throw the bread and wine into the fire to be destroyed, he gives them as food and drink to his disciples. We see how Jesus understands his own death. (David Yeago, Reformation 2000)

¹ ("The Moment When Sacramental Union Begins," in *The Church: Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn*, page 245. This collection of Piepkorn essays is available through the ALPB: <http://alpb.org/thechurch.html>)

Some of you longtime members of Immanuel might remember Seminarian John Reynolds. He was a field ed student here at Immanuel, and I thought he was great. One of the lovely things he did for us was to arrange a Maundy Thursday Vigil. That was back in 1998. I still have the list of readings he assembled for us. The idea of the Maundy Thursday vigil is that we would take our place alongside the disciples who were asked by Jesus to “watch and pray.” We read about this, for example, in Mark 14:

³³And he taketh with him Peter and James and John, and began to be sore amazed, and to be very heavy; ³⁴And saith unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful unto death: tarry ye here, and watch. (Mark 14:33-34, KJV)

Jesus goes off yonder and begins his great prayer of self-surrender to the Father:

³⁶And he said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt.” (Mark 14:36, RSV)

Jesus returns to the disciples, finds them asleep, and tries to stir them up to watch and pray:

³⁷And he came and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour?”
³⁸Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Mark 14:37-38, RSV)

Jesus returns again, and again the disciples are asleep. They do not know what to say to him.

A third time Jesus prays and returns to his disciples, and again they are asleep. Jesus speaks gently to them:

⁴¹And he cometh the third time, and saith unto them, Sleep on now, and take your rest: it is enough, the hour is come; behold, the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.
⁴²Rise up, let us go; lo, he that betrayeth me is at hand. (Mark 14:41-42, KJV)

These are the things that will happen later tonight, after the footwashing in John’s Gospel and after the institution of the Holy Communion in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Now, here is the dramatic thing for us: In the institution of the Holy Communion, Jesus is taking the faithfulness that he will demonstrate in his Gethsemane prayer of surrender and in all his agonizing passion to come, and he is letting *us* in on the benefit of it.

David Yeago is right. The faithfulness and obedience of Jesus fulfills the covenant with God of which Moses had spoken:

¹⁹I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live: (Deuteronomy 30:19, KJV)

That is good for Jesus. But how is it good for us? Answer, it is good for us because of what Jesus did when he instituted the Holy Communion.

Again, David Yeago is right that Jesus could have taken his body and blood and cast them into the fireplace. It would have been an excellent visual demonstration that he was surrendering his whole life to the will of God. But he did not cast them into the fireplace. Instead, he gave his body and his blood to his disciples and through them to you and me. And he pinned down the meaning of what he was doing: he was “giving himself” for you, for me, for the forgiveness of our sins.

We could well tremble before such a deed. Jesus knew he was heading toward death, but in that institution of the Holy Communion he was specifying that *his* death was to be for *our* sake. This one thing he knew and one thing he said: that he was giving his body and his blood *for us*!

That is why I treat the sacramental elements with such respect. It was with these ordinary elements of bread and wine that Jesus worked out a “new covenant” between God and his disciples long ago. And it is with these ordinary elements of bread and wine that this same Jesus, resurrected, works out a new covenant *now* between God and us modern-day disciples in the Blessed Sacrament to which we will soon turn. He does it! and not we ourselves. Indeed, we could not have done it. He worked out a new relationship between God and us at the cost of his own precious body and blood. So, I cannot bring myself to treat the host casually. It is not meant for the floor or the trash can. It is meant for life for us sinners!

ENJOY THIS NEW COVENANT

So, let it be accomplished in our lives. Let it be that in the Holy Communion, Jesus grafts us into a new covenant. He incorporates us into his own favorable relationship to the God. What, then, does this mean for us going forward? What does it mean that we are part of a new covenant with God?

Well, a “covenant” is solemn promise of good between parties, so that the parties can then flourish. A peace treaty, for example, is a covenant before formerly warring or potentially warring nations. It is an agreement that lets both

sides put off their concentration on waging war and turn to their peacetime business.

Perhaps the most common form of a covenant is that of marriage. Marriage is a whole-hearted, unconditional promise of good to one another, forever, “for better, for worse, for richer for poor, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish until we are parted by death.” Strengthened by that promise, both the husband and wife have a chance to flourish.

Back in college days, it seemed to me that it was the married couples who could afford to be generous. They were the ones who could invite you home for supper, or let you hang out with them and listen to the music, or go to basketball games together. And they could afford to do such things precisely because for them, some things were settled. They meant to be true to one another, and therefore they could afford to be generous toward others.

Well, that was an adolescent thought. Since then I have encountered many people who are generous, whether or not they are married.

And yet, the idea that being in a covenant frees you to turn to the good is one that I think is true. When Jesus wove us into a new covenant with God, he thereby settled some things for us. There is no need for us to earn our own salvation, for example. That is wasted energy. We should be turning to more wholesome work. We do not need to earn our salvation because we are already a part of the new covenant. So enjoy it. The covenant means that you and I promise to be good to God, and he promises to be good to us. Well, the way to be good to God is to be faithful to him, honor his name, worship him in church, and love our neighbors. This is our life henceforth, just as married life has its joys and labors appropriate to it.

At the end of this liturgy, we will watch and pray with Jesus at least to this extent: We will kneel and in our gradually darkening church, we will listen to the prayers of Jesus as he endures his passion, crucifixion, and death. As we listen to those concluding Psalms, 22 and 88, let’s try to take the immense thought to heart that he is giving his body and blood for us, and that indeed he is doing that precisely now in the Holy Communion to which we now turn.

He is extraordinarily gracious to us, and to this gracious One be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.