

“Who is Worthy?” (1st Corinthians 11:27-29)

**Preached on February 20th at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Yucaipa, CA (LC-MS), and
again on March 20th at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Orange, CA (LC-MS)**

Rev. Dr. Alfonso O. Espinosa

Pastor, Saint Paul’s Lutheran Church of Irvine (LC-MS)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Lent is the time for spiritual renewal; to get closer to God and for our faith in Christ to be made stronger. As we wait to celebrate the most important high feast of the Church Year, namely Easter Sunday, we would be wise to join the tradition of the last 2000 years in Christendom to live in a humble way during Lent: confessing our sins and holding to Christ alone as all we need. To live this way is to know the peace of God; it is to be right with God since such a faith knows Christ alone as one’s righteousness. With such a faith, we are able to say as St. Paul wrote in Philippians 1: *“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. (v 21)”* With such a faith, we discover the secret to being content in whatever situation we face in life: *“I can do all things through [Christ] who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:13)”*

Well such a faith sounds good and we all know how much we would like to have a faith like that, but instead how easy is it to live with a troubled heart instead? To live in such a way that anxiety is as common as the air we breathe. We know what it is like *not* to live in peace because we are sinners and our sinful hearts rage to pursue the idols of our American culture. We come to church, but our hearts are cold because we insist that we must continue to pursue gods like money, “love” [with quotation marks], success, and power. And as long as we live for money; as long as we are so insecure that we are desperate for other people to love us; as long as our identities rely on our success; and as long as our greatest satisfactions come from trying to control other people, then we will know no peace nor spiritual renewal (no matter how violet our church paraments and no matter how well we know the liturgies of our Christian tradition). Without God’s help, we are lost.

So needless to say, we need to know in what way and where and when God helps us, not according to the opinions of men, but according to the inspired and inerrant – faith creating – Word of Christ. This is why dear Christians we are meditating upon The Lord’s Supper during this season of Lent. Holy Communion and the 40 days of Lent are not a random association. God knows your predicament. He knows your anxiety. He knows your fears. He knows about the guilt and the shame you live with. He knows and in the greatest love and mercy in the universe, He has done something about it. The Lord Jesus has given you His body and blood in, with, and under the bread and the wine in Holy Communion.

How great is this? St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch who professed his faith in Christ before Emperor Trajan and subsequently was condemned to the wild beasts in A.D. 107 wrote of what he knew gave him strength from God. He wrote this about Holy Communion: ***“Stand fast, brethren, in the faith of Jesus Christ, and in His love, in His passion, and in His resurrection. Do ye all come together in common, and by name, through grace, in one faith in God the Father and of Jesus Christ His only-begotten Son...breaking one and the same bread, which is the medicine of immortality, and the antidote which prevents us from dying, but a cleansing remedy driving away evil, [which causes] that we should live in God through Jesus Christ. (Ante-Nicene Fathers Volume 1, p. 57)”***

Hear that? Ignatius knew the fantastic help of the Lord’s Supper. With it, he received “the medicine of immortality, and the antidote which prevents us from dying.” To have it is to face anything, even death, with God’s victory and power of eternal life in and through Christ Jesus! No amount of money, or “love,” or success, or power could ever buy an antidote which prevents us from dying. With this Supper Christ remains in us and therefore His life dwells in us that is a life that can never die!

Such an amazing gift leads us to ask, “Who receives this Sacrament worthily?” The answer is also in the Word of God and has nothing to do with the opinions of men. God says – not any man – but God says in First Corinthians chapter 11, verses 27-29: ***“²⁷Whoever, therefore, eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.”***

Our sinful flesh squirms under this instruction from God’s Word. How can such a great gift as the Lord’s Supper come with a *warning*? It just doesn’t seem right! It would seem more reasonable that since God is love (1st John 4:8 and 16) that the last thing He would do is make us self-conscious in coming to His table! But this is the thought process of sinners who want God’s prerogative to decide what is right. We must remember, however, what we confessed at the beginning of Lent: we are but dust and therefore we must despair of ourselves and run to Jesus. We must trust His Word and know that what He says will bless us in ways we cannot begin to imagine.

As a matter of fact, there could be no more *loving* words than the warning and admonition we are given in the Scripture we are considering. Let me explain by way of analogy: I love my eight (8) children, but the *way* in which I express my love to them must be considerate of what they know and what they are capable of doing. This does not mean that I love some of

my children more than others, nor does it mean that my children have to try to earn my love. Of course not! Nor does this imply that my older children are better, more intelligent, or holier than my younger children. Such an understanding would be ridiculous. Yet at the same time, if one of my older children comes home to visit, my love for them includes permitting them to take my car keys and drive my car. If, however, my youngest daughter Katherine who is 10 years old or my youngest son Bryan who is 11 years old asks to drive my car, I will not hesitate to say, "No." Does this mean that I have suddenly morphed into an unloving father? Of course not! Much to the contrary, precisely *because* I love them, I will do everything I can to *protect* them. Cars are also gifts from God, but there is a reason God requires we have a driver's license before we drive them.

This is easy for people to understand, so why do people struggle so much about who can receive the Holy Supper? One answer is because of the popular notion that anything that falls under the heading of "faith" must suddenly have a different set of rules. God may establish the atomic numbers of the elements, He may establish the laws of physics for the universe, and He may even establish the governmental authorities, but when it comes to Holy Communion, all of a sudden we get this notion that who receives it is no longer up to God, but up to us! *Where does this idea come from? It comes from our sinful flesh, it comes from evil influences in the world that despise the authority of God's Holy Word, and it comes from the devil. It does not come from God who says, "For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. (1st Corinthians 11:29)"*

Jesus gives gifts. Some of them need little instruction. For example: milkshakes. Milkshakes are also gifts from God, but how much instruction do you need when it comes to a milkshake? But the greatest gift given to us on this earth is the Holy Sacrament of the body and blood of Jesus Christ our Savior. No gift is as sacred; no gift is as holy. And if one must go to driver's training for a driver's license, then why do we complain that God takes the time to teach us about who receives the Sacrament worthily?

But He doesn't do it to drag you down; He doesn't do it to annoy you. He teaches worthy reception in His Word so that this greatest gift of Holy Communion would truly and actually be of benefit to you. It is so powerful, it is so wonderful, that yes, there is a wrong way to receive it; but don't despair because -- more importantly -- there is a *right* way to receive it. And if we are faithful, we will know that right way and we will teach it to others out of love to God and out of love to our neighbor who does not know.

So, let's get to the most important part: "who receives this sacrament worthily?" Listen to these words from our Lutheran Confessions (Triglotta, 997, The Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration. VII. Of the Holy Supper)

*For Christians who are of weak faith, diffident, troubled, and heartily terrified because of the greatness and number of their sins, and think that in this their great impurity they are not worthy of this precious treasure and the benefits of Christ, and who feel and lament their weakness of faith, and from their hearts desire that they may serve God with a stronger, more joyful faith and pure obedience, **they are the truly worthy guests** for whom this highly venerable Sacrament [and sacred feast] has been especially instituted and appointed; as Christ says, Matt. 11, 28: "Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Also Matt. 9, 12: "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that be sick." Also [2 Cor. 12, 9]: "God's strength is made perfect in weakness."*

But your worthiness does not depend on your weakness or your strength, but it depends solely on the merit of Jesus Christ! You are on the right track to receive Holy Communion when you understand St. Ambrose who said, "**Because I always sin, I am always bound to take the medicine.**" (Triglotta, 67, Augsburg Confession, Article XXIV: Of the Mass) You are worthy when you know that this Sacrament is the true body and blood of your Savior and Lord Jesus Christ; when you recognize with eyes of faith that when the communion bread enters your mouth, then so does the body of Christ, and when you recognize with eyes of faith that when the communion wine enters your mouth, then so does the blood of Christ.

But this is no mere intellectual process or simply recognition of an article of faith. But part and parcel of your worthy reception is to know that this Sacrament requires faith itself. Faith that knows who Christ is and who you are. Faith will never permit you to think that you are going through a religious ceremony and somehow getting credit for it. Faith instead marvels that God would love you, a sinner, so much so as to give the very life of His Son Jesus Christ for you. Faith marvels that you were saved by the one sacrifice of Jesus' cross and that the very body and blood of Jesus from that cross is now put into your mouth for the forgiveness of sins.

Those who receive Holy Communion unworthily, however, do not feel their sin nor their great need for Christ's forgiveness. They receive Holy Communion in judgment and condemnation because they do not see Christ in the Sacrament not knowing that just as the Son of God had the power to create the universe from nothing and to raise Himself from the grave He also has power to give His very body and blood into their mouths. Therefore, they do not see Christ's body and blood, nor do they see the powerful forgiveness of sins bound up in the Christ given to them. As a result, the gift is totally rejected even though they receive it into

their mouths. They receive the Sacrament to judgment and condemnation because they do not believe the words, *“Given, and shed for you, for the remission of sins.”*

But those who worthily receive the Sacrament have been taught and they know -- like *you* know -- that our only worthiness is Jesus Himself. And you know that Jesus came to give His body and blood for sinners like you and me.

With this gift of Holy Communion, therefore, we have our Lenten renewal. In fact, we have our *constant* renewal. With this Sacrament you are blessed beyond what any words can describe, because to receive the body and blood of Jesus is to have *absolute* assurance that God is on your side. And if God is for you, who can be against you? (Romans 8:31) But how do you know that God is for you? Because Jesus has given you His Holy Sacrament! But how can you receive worthily?

Imagine that as you come forward to receive the Holy Sacrament that your heart is represented by a face. Half of the face of your heart is sad, there is a frown on that side of your face and there are tears – while you feel your great sin – rolling down your cheek. This side of your face, this side of your heart contemplates the words, “Jesus **died** for me!” And you know that the very Son of God went through that excruciating pain with your sin and your curse heaped upon Him. You are – along with the rest of us sinners – responsible for the sins that put Jesus on the cross. Your heart is heavy, you feel sorrow on account of your sin as you contemplate the words, “Jesus **died** for me!” So that you come forward recognizing that you are receiving the true body and blood of Jesus Christ that was given on account of your sin...there is no doubt, you come forward as a sinner in desperate need!

Now imagine as you continue to come forward for Holy Communion and as God renews your faith through the reception of the Sacrament once again that the other side of your face, the other side of your heart is much different. On this other side, your eye is bright, your smile is wide, light shines upon your face and your face beams with joy...and you know the greatest peace you’ve ever known. All the while you are contemplating the same exact words as the other side, but the emphasis in the words is different. Because now you confess the rest of the story: **“Jesus died *for me!*” *That is how much He loved me and this is my great salvation! For me, Jesus gives His body and blood! For me, He forgives all my sins! For me, I am made a child of the Living God! For me, this medicine of the Sacrament ensures that I am bound to the One who can never die! For me, for me, for me! And with such faith in Jesus, we are worthy to receive the Sacrament!***