

“For You” (Luke 22:20)

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. I am excited that the Servants of the Word -- pastors and congregations in the Pacific Southwest District desiring to hold to the teaching and practice of our *Lutheran Confessions* binding us to the inspired and inerrant Word of God -- was given the honor and privilege of including you, Trinity Lutheran Church, Whittier, CA in this year's pulpit exchange. Thank you for welcoming me in Jesus' Name. And just as a personal aside: while I have the great joy of serving a growing congregation in Irvine (at Saint Paul's Lutheran Church of Irvine currently worshipping in the gym at Crean Lutheran High School in Irvine), being here is inspirational to me. You have been given by the Lord -- obviously -- a gorgeous sanctuary to the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Being here makes me look forward to the future when perhaps the Lord will see fit to permit my parish to have a sanctuary of her own as well. So thank you also for the inspiration! In Jesus' Name. Amen.

My dear brothers and sisters in the Lord, this year we are connecting our Lenten season with the theme of the Lord's Supper. Over the next several weeks you will have guest pastors proclaim that what the Word of God teaches is the very body and blood of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ given for you for the forgiveness of sins over and over and over again.

Our salvation, our being rescued from our sin, the evil influences of the world, and from the devil himself is bound-up in this Holy Sacrament also known as “Holy Communion,” “The Eucharist,” “The Lord's Supper,” and “The Sacrament of the Altar.”

As a matter of fact, there is an even more primitive and pristine reference to the Holy Supper in Acts 2:42 when it is described in the context of first-century Christian worship as quite simply “The Breaking of Bread.”

And if there has ever been a time that we *need* this gift of the Lord's Supper in our lives and in the Church today in this world today, then it is now. Furthermore, so that we can truly appreciate our very great need for the Lord's Supper, we mustn't be naïve about what has occurred in terms of Christianity in America which probably has had a more profound influence on us than we realize. I can tell you this (and I don't think anyone here tonight will be surprised) that the substance of American Christianity is not confessional Lutheranism, but is hands-down American Evangelicalism. In this popular way of thinking – and in application to the pulpit exchange series – Holy Communion is nothing other than a holy and reverential remembrance or memorial of the blessed sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. We of course do not deny the symbolic significance of the Holy Supper, but it is much, much more than that. For in this Supper, poor sinners like you and me, receive Jesus Himself.

The popular Christian culture, however, doesn't like this idea. It insists that if Jesus is Lord in your life which is to say that you have *already* received Jesus, then it is therefore non-sense that you would need to continue receiving Him over and over again. “Make up your mind already poor Lutherans. Have you or have you not received the Lord Jesus Christ [so goes the tricky argument which is a classic either-or fallacy of logic]? If you have, then boldly proclaim that you are born-again and do not make Communion something

more than what it actually is: it is simply affirming what you already know and what you already have.” So goes a representative complaint against what is perceived as formalism, traditionalism, and institutionalism.

These are terrible temptations which would work to rob you of the great intended benefit of the Lord’s Supper which far surpasses mere symbolism and memorialism. Again, we are bold to proclaim the truth: Jesus comes to you in this Sacrament over and over again...and it isn’t good enough to reduce this to a metaphorical meaning; it isn’t even good enough to reduce this to a so-called “spiritual” meaning...none of these will suffice. The body and blood of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary which became living again from the dead is the SAME body and blood that is actually, truly, and miraculously given to you when you receive the bread and wine of the Sacrament today. Jesus said, “This *is* my body...this *is* my blood.” You receive Jesus’ *body* into your mouth when you receive the Communion bread; and you receive Jesus’ *blood* into your mouth when you receive the Communion wine. Again, mere symbolism and memorialism doesn’t cut the mustard, doesn’t fit the bill, and doesn’t hold water. The compromising teaching of the popular crowd won’t work and frankly it assumes that our God of miracles is suddenly unable to perform them.

This greater reality is not just a “Lutheran thing.” Long before the Christian denominations, the early Church took seriously the plain and simple teaching of God’s Word. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, professed his faith in Christ before Emperor Trajan and was subsequently condemned to the wild beasts in A.D. 107. I wonder how Ignatius valued and considered the Holy Supper? Well, he

wrote of it in his Epistle to the Ephesians: ***“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 of 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)”

Ignatius knew that in the Supper we receive so much more than a mere symbol or a ghostly presence. There is no ambiguity here. St. Paul wrote in 1st Corinthians 10:16 in a straight-forward manner: ***“The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?”*** We are to simply take Jesus at His Word. If He said it, it must be true; and if He said it, He has no problem making it happen!

But what’s the big deal? Why is this so important? Does it really matter whether we confess this doctrinal statement or that theological position? Are these the things that are really important to us? They should be, because of what comes out so simply and so plainly in Luke’s Gospel, chapter 22, verse 20. Jesus said, ***“This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”*** And once we know what this Supper is, what should stand out next for us are the simple words, ***“for you.”*** The Greek is plural “you” as in “you yourselves.” Jesus is speaking to His Christian people.

And what of these Christian people? They are sinners. Tonight we sing the hymn, "The Infant Priest Was Holy Born" (#624 in the Lutheran Service Book). It includes the words which describe us sinners as we receive the Holy Supper: ***"On sin-parched lips the chalice pours...(stanza 6)"*** "On sin-parched lips." That's us. We have indeed received Christ already in Holy Baptism. We have indeed been born again by water and the Spirit. Yes, we have Christ already, but as in any good marriage, the bride and bridegroom are to come together over and over again. Love is sealed in the wedding vows. You were sealed in your baptism. But love is also nurtured and it continues to be poured out throughout marriage (at least that is God's plan for marriage), and forgiveness, and grace, and Christ is poured out over and over again in your marriage with God through the Holy Supper.

I mentioned the "either-or" logical fallacy: all of this is not a matter of "either we have already received Christ OR we need to continue to receive Christ." No, it is not an either-or, but a both-and. We most definitely have received Christ AND we most definitely need to receive Him over and over again. Because we are poor sinners who struggle mightily against our sinful flesh that we are called to confess and repent of especially in the season of Lent and on this holy day when we confess that in our sin we are only dust and ashes. We still need God as much as we did on the day that Jesus' died on the cross for us; we still need God as much as we did on the day that we were baptized into Christ!

So Luther knew exactly what he was writing about in *The Small Catechism*: **"But what should you do if you are not aware of this need and have no hunger and thirst for the Sacrament?"**

Luther answers: ***"To such a person no better advice can be given than this: first, he should touch his body to see if he still has flesh and blood. Then he should believe what the Scriptures say of it in Galatians 5 and Romans 7. Second, he should look around to see whether he is still in the world, and remember that there will be no lack of sin and trouble, as the Scriptures say in John 15-16 and in 1 John 2 and 5. Third, he will certainly have the devil also around him, who with his lying and murdering day and night will let him have no peace, within or without, as the Scriptures picture him in John 8 and 16; 1 Peter 5; Ephesians 6; and 2 Timothy 2."***

Bo Giertz wrote brilliantly in his book *The Hammer of God*: the chaplain named Linder was asked the question, ***"How often should one go to the Lord's Supper?"*** Linder answered, ***"That depends a little on how you ask the question. If you ask how often you must go, it may indicate a stubborn hear that wants to buy God's grace as cheaply as possible and that does not really want to be with Jesus. If that is the case, you must pray God to convert you. If on the other hand, you ask how often you ought to go, our Lord's answer is, 'As oft as ye do this,' and that means that you must do it oftener than the great majority, who commune four times a year just for the sake of propriety. And if you ask how often you may go, you are showing the right hunger for grace, and my answer then is: Go in the joy of the Lord as often as you can. But do not be careless about the preparation!"*** (p. 79)

We go because we are so joyful that the Lord has invited us to be forgiven over and over again; we are so joyful that God assures that we poor sinners with sin-parched lips will be received, and loved, and revived all over again every, single time. We are

joyful for this medicine of immortality that prevents eternal death, but which fills us with eternal life!

We are to thirst for this saving gift which is one of the keys for Lenten renewal. I do not believe I will ever forget that Sunday while I served at Saint John Evangelical Lutheran Church, Covina when Vern Dettman approached the altar. He was elderly, he was weak, he shook to walk with his cane, the elders had to help him up the chancel steps so that he could reach the communion rail. He knelt down shakily and yet when I came to give him the Sacrament he appeared eager, thirsty for it, and took such great assurance as he received it. He walked away renewed in Christ. That very week, I received "one of those calls" in the middle of the night. I rushed to the Dettman's residence. I arrived just in time to see the ambulance doors close where Vern's body was covered up. I walked into the house and saw his dear wife Jane sitting and rocking in her seat, mourning the death of her husband. It was one of those moments when you realize that there are no words, no words...it is the time when the pastor must be quiet. I simply sat down next to her and held her and rocked with her. As we sat there for some time, she stopped and looked at me and said, ***"I am so glad he received Communion on Sunday!"*** She said this as one who got it. We poor sinners need Jesus constantly and when we receive Him constantly, the greatest comfort and the greatest joy is given to those who trust in Christ. The rest of stanza 7 from the hymn goes like this: ***"On sin-parched lips the chalice pours His quenching blood that life restores.*** (624 "The Infant Priest Was Holy Born," by Chad L. Bird)