

Maundy Thursday

Ex. 24:3-11; Ps. 116:10-17; 1 Cor. 10:16-17

March 28, 2024

Mark 14:12-26

One thing about us, we love to eat. I've learned over the years that one trick to increase attendance is to have food available before or after worship, such as a coffee hour or a potluck supper. As they say, if you feed them, they will come.

In fact, we frequently look for occasions or pretexts to eat together. We celebrate birthdays with cake and ice cream. We have receptions at weddings. We observe anniversaries with a banquet. We even eat after funerals.

Jesus enjoyed a good meal. His detractors once accused him of being a glutton and a drunkard. Of course, they also thought John the Baptist went too far in the opposite direction, with all his fasting and odd diet. They were going to criticize Jesus no matter what he did.

The distinctive act of Christian worship is a meal. Other religions sing hymns. Muslim imams and Jewish rabbis give sermons. Prayer is pretty much universal no matter what god you worship. It is the Lord's Supper that is distinctive about Christian worship. Having a service without communion is really like having a synagogue service, not a Christian liturgy.

But why do we do this? Well, first of all, communion is a reminder of the Last Supper, the last meal Jesus ate before his suffering and death for us. He told us, "Do this to remember me." Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes."

Lutherans sometimes get huffy about Christians for whom communion is a memorial meal. In doing so, we might miss the point that it **is** a memorial meal. Of course, it's not **only** a memorial meal, as we will say in a minute, but it is that. It **is** a memorial, a reminder of the passion, of the body crucified, of the blood poured out on the cross, on our behalf to atone for our sins. In this meal we proclaim the Lord's **death** until He comes.

So when we come to the altar we rightly remember our sinfulness, our lost condition apart from Christ. We remember the price paid for our redemption. When the disciples ask, “Lord, is it I?”, we should do the same, knowing too often it **is I** who have fallen prey to weakness and temptation and sin, and need so desperately Christ’s affirming word, “This is **for you.**”

So, this meal looks to the past, to the Cross of Calvary. But it also looks to the future. After all, Paul said, “We show forth His death **until He comes.**” Jesus pointed the disciples to the day when he would drink the new wine again in the Kingdom of God. In one of our offertories, we call communion “a foretaste of the feast to come,” or, as I like to say, the appetizer for heaven. In this meal, we are looking forward to the marriage feast of the Lamb.

In that imagery, we individually and collectively are the bride of Christ. This little bit of bread, this little sip of wine, is like a little kiss of fiancées one with another. The marriage, the consummation, awaits. There in the kingdom the wedding reception, the banquet, is beautiful, boundless and endless.

So, in communion we remember the past. We look to the future. But we also live in the present. After all, Jesus said, “This **is** my body”, not “This **was** my body” or “This **will be** my body.” Yes, here we have an anticipation of what will be complete on the Last Day. But Christ is truly present here and now. And He is present not just in a spiritual or mental way, but also very physically. We have an incarnate religion. We believe the eternal Son of God became a very real human being, Jesus of Nazareth, who now comes to us in the very physical forms of bread and wine.

It is the living Christ who comes to us, not the dead one. It is the one who arose on Easter Sunday and ascended into heaven, who now lives eternally with the Father and the Spirit, who comes to us, in this physical form. Thus, communion is not only a memorial meal (though it is that) or a longing for our eternal home (though it is that also) but a very present experience of Jesus, Jesus in His glorified body.

By eating we take that body into our bodies, and we are joined to Him. We truly become bone of His bone, flesh of His flesh, and the two become one. We eat the body of Christ, and we become the body of Christ. As St. Augustine said, “You are what you eat. (You thought that was just a slogan of 1960’s hippie culture.)

In our 2<sup>nd</sup> lesson this evening, Paul said it is a *koinonia* in the blood of Christ and in the body of Christ. That Greek word *koinonia* means a fellowship, a participation, a partnership, a communion.

And it is a participation which extends laterally as well as vertically. At our home church, St. Timothy’s, we literally share in one bread (a real loaf of bread, not wafers). So, Paul says, in this way, we show we are one body. Drinking from the same cup (even for those of you who prefer the individual glasses) shows we are one. All of us are one with Christ, but also one with each other. We are, together, the body of Christ.

That is why any dissension or strife in the church is so grievous. We are all here to be one. In I Corinthians Paul criticized all the divisions in the church. The Corinthians were divided by who was their favorite pastor. They were divided by social class. They were divided by gender. They were divided by pride and striving for authority. None of these divisions has any place at the altar. Here we are all the same, sinners saved by grace alone. We are all equally forgiven, reconciled by the death of Christ. We are all one with our living Savior.

Yes, it is in anticipation. We are not yet free of sin, so we need to come here for forgiveness. But our new life in Christ is also a reality for now.

We love to eat. This little sip of wine and little wafer won’t do much to satisfy our physical hunger and thirst. But this is no ordinary meal. It is the place where heaven and earth are joined together.

Come, let us eat, for now the feast is spread.

Amen