

Holy Thursday, April 6, 2023

FIRST CORINTHIANS 11:28.

A person ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.

I would like to relate a true story to you this evening, a true story about a pastor named Johannes Strieter. God willing, this will be the first of many Strieter stories that I'll share with you from this pulpit, because even though in many respects he was a very ordinary pastor, he lived in extraordinary times and was an extraordinary story teller. Pastor Strieter was a Missouri Synod pastor in the mid- to late 1800s. Remember that for many of those years the Missouri Synod and our Wisconsin Synod were in complete doctrinal agreement and were therefore in fellowship with each other.

At any rate, Pastor Strieter accepted a call to four rural congregations in Wisconsin late in 1859 and was installed in January of 1860. Pastor Strieter experienced a number of hardships in Wisconsin, and one of them was with the celebration of Communion. You see, it was standard practice among many Lutherans at the time, even considered a necessary practice by many, that if people wished to participate in Communion, they first had to announce their intention to do so privately with the pastor at a set time prior to Communion. This was called announcing. The pastor would then assist the person in examining himself or herself by asking them some questions. Incidentally, this practice continued in some congregations, including in our synod, right up until the 1960s, 70s, and 80s.

But the problem was that, when Strieter arrived at his new congregations, they were completely unfamiliar with that practice. Strieter explained to them why the practice was in place. He cited passages like the one in front of us this evening, where Paul tells us that we ought examine ourselves before partaking of Holy Communion. He cited 1 Corinthians 4:1, where Paul says that the divinely called public ministers of the gospel are stewards of the mysteries of God, and he cited Matthew 7:6, where Jesus tells us not to throw our pearls to pigs. Even if Pastor Strieter was wrong in insisting on the practice as a necessary one, his concerns were completely valid. He was concerned on the one hand about people taking the Lord's Supper lightly, which the Bible warns us against in the strongest terms. And on the other hand he was concerned that as a public minister he was being a faithful administrator of the Lord's Supper and not knowingly or willingly distributing it to someone who was continuing in some sin without repentance.

Strieter didn't know what to do. So he asked the administrators of his congregations, "What if it is absolutely necessary for me to say something to someone before the Lord's Supper for the sake of my conscience?"

"Then just say it," they said.

"In front of everyone?" he asked.

"Of course!" they said.

"Okay," said Pastor Strieter, "that's what I'll do."

The first time he held the Lord's Supper at one of his churches after that, he had 75 men and 75 women give him their names before Communion. Once he had all their names written down, he asked them as a group, "Do you believe from the heart in Jesus Christ as your Savior?"

"Yes," they answered.

“Do you believe that in the Lord’s Supper the true body and blood of Christ is eaten and drunk under bread and wine?”

“Yes,” they answered.

“Are you reconciled with your neighbor, and do you wish to partake of the Holy Supper as repentant sinners?”

“Yes,” they answered.

So he gave them all Communion.

But it wasn’t long before his fears were realized. On his way home one time, he saw a farmer, who was one of his members, unhitching his oxen from the cart and letting them have a drink and then hitching them back up again. The farmer was so drunk he could hardly get it done. That Sunday they celebrated the Lord’s Supper, and the man who had been drunk sat in the back, but gave his name along with everyone else.

“But didn’t I see you drunk the other day?” Pastor Strieter asked.

“Yes,” the man said.

“Does that happen at other times?”

“Yes,” the man said.

“Then you are a drunkard,” Pastor Strieter said, “and the Bible says that drunkards will not inherit the kingdom of God [1 Corinthians 6:10]. If you take the Lord’s Supper, you will only do so to your detriment.”

The man said he was sorry and that he would amend his ways. Pastor Strieter said he forgave him and that he would give him the Lord’s Supper if he was coming to it as a repentant Christian, and that he would also be keeping an eye on him to see that he was sincere about amending his ways.

Another time when taking down names for Communion, a father stood up and said that his daughter and son-in-law were holding a grudge against him and his wife. The young couple was sitting across the aisle from them. Pastor Strieter asked the young couple and they admitted it. “Then reconcile with each other immediately,” Pastor Strieter said. So all four of them stepped into the aisle and shook hands, and he was able to commune them with everyone else.

Another time he found out that one of his communing members didn’t believe in the existence of the devil. So he had to talk through that with him in front of the entire congregation. “If you don’t believe in the existence of the devil, then you don’t believe the Bible. And if you don’t believe the Bible, then you can’t believe what the Bible teaches about Communion. And if you don’t believe what the Bible teaches about Communion, you will only receive it to your harm.” On that occasion, Strieter had to refuse that man Communion.

Eventually the administrators came back to Pastor Strieter and said that the people didn’t like having to discuss their shameful sins in front of everyone.

“I thought so,” Pastor Strieter said. “Would you perhaps like to start the practice of announcing?” Now they were all for it.

Stories like that sometimes make me wonder. Up until the practice of announcing gradually disappeared from our church body in the late 1900s, the practice was very old. It dates back to at least 250 AD when ministers called penitentiaries were called to hear people’s confessions of sin before Communion.

I know that the Bible nowhere explicitly commands the practice, but I wonder, “Is it wise to abandon a practice that had been around in the Christian church for more than 1,700 years?” More importantly than that, I wonder, “Are people taking Paul’s command to examine themselves before receiving Communion seriously? Do they know how to do it? Or is it a lost art? And if it is a lost art, how do we get it back?” I know that I myself have often not taken the time to examine myself as I ought to have. So I can’t help but wonder about the rest of our members.

I don’t know what all the answers are for making sure that Christians are examining themselves before Communion and for teaching this art. But I figured that one of the ways was to preach on it and to remind ourselves of what we learned in catechism instruction about how to examine ourselves.

Question 1: Do I confess I am a sinner with sins that need forgiving?

Pastor Strieter’s questions are actually quite good, and more or less contain the thoughts we want to keep in mind. First of all, Jesus tells us that his body and blood is poured out for us for the forgiveness of sins. That means the first question we need to ask ourselves is, “Do I confess that I do indeed have sins that need forgiving?” I notice that communicant members of a church will sometimes not attend Communion when it’s offered, especially if Communion is offered twice per month or more. Sometimes there are good reasons for that. For instance, perhaps they have invited some guests that cannot commune with us, and they do not want them to feel awkward or out of place. But I know that sometimes Christians also get this erroneous thought in their minds that they don’t really need it, because they can’t really think of anything that bad they did since the last time they received Communion. I once had a homebound member that I was only able to visit every three to four months, and one time as I was getting ready to serve her Communion, she told me, “Oh Pastor, there hasn’t been any sinnin’ goin’ on around here!”

We need to stop and remember that the Lord who taught us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread,” which implies that we will pray the Lord’s Prayer or a prayer like it *every day*, is the same Lord who taught us to pray in that same daily prayer, “Forgive us our trespasses.” Jesus is clearly implying that we sin every day. We need to remember 1 John 1:8: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” Or, as Luther put it in his Large Catechism, if we don’t feel the need for forgiveness, we should pinch ourselves and see if we are still flesh and blood. If we are, then we are still sinners who need forgiveness.

This is also where the Small Catechism comes in handy. Go through the explanations to the commandments and ask yourself, “Have I done that this past week? Have I done that *today*?” For instance, the Second Commandment commands us not just to avoid using God’s name for no purpose, or to curse, swear, lie, or deceive, but it also commands us to call on God’s name in every trouble, to pray to him, to praise him, and to give thanks to him. The Eighth Commandment commands us not just to avoid telling lies about our neighbor, betraying him, or giving him a bad name (even if what we’re saying about him or her is the absolute truth), but also to defend him, to speak well of him, and to take his words and actions in the kindest possible way. Those are just two of the Ten Commandments. Have we done even one of those

two commandments perfectly? Then what about the others? Not to mention that any time we break any of the others, we also break the First.

Question 2: Do I believe that Jesus gives me forgiveness for all my sins in Communion?

After asking ourselves whether we acknowledge that we are sinners in need of forgiveness, we need to ask ourselves, “Do I believe that Jesus really did give his body over to death and pour out his lifeblood *for me*, to forgive me my sins, as he said he did?” (Matthew 26:28). If we don’t ask ourselves the first question, we will stay away because we think we don’t need it. But if we don’t ask ourselves this second question, we will stay away because we think we are not worthy of it. But Jesus did not come for the healthy, but the sick. Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened” (Matthew 11:28). After John said that we deceive ourselves if we claim to be without sin, he went on to say, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Even if our answer to this second question echoes the words of the father of the demon-possessed boy, “I do believe, Lord; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24), because we perceive acutely that both faith and unbelief are active in us at the same time, we should still come to Communion to have our faith strengthened by Jesus.

Question 3: Do I believe that Jesus gives me his actual body and blood together with the bread and wine?

The next question we ought to ask ourselves has to do with the doctrine we call “the real presence.” Jesus says, “This bread *is* my body. This wine *is* my blood.” In the verse right after this one, Paul writes, “For if anyone eats and drinks in an unworthy way because he does not recognize the Lord’s body, he eats and drinks judgment on himself.” In the verse right before this he says that whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning, not against bread and wine, not against an institution or arrangement of the Lord, but against the Lord’s own body and blood, because that is what is truly there.

So we ought to ask ourselves, “Do I believe my Savior’s words? Do I believe that in this Holy Meal he does give me his real, actual body, the same body that died for me on the cross? Do I believe that he does give me his real, actual blood, the same blood that was poured out for me on the cross?” He doesn’t say that we have to understand how he does so. He says it is a miracle for believing. This is why Luther said that if he *had* to choose, he would rather commune with the Roman Catholics than with the Anabaptists and others that were the forerunners of the modern-day Reformed, Baptists, Evangelicals, and non-denominationalists—because at least the Roman Catholics believed what the historic Christian Church has always believed, that Jesus’s true body and blood is actually there in the Lord’s Supper.

Question 4: Am I holding a grudge or continuing in any sin without repentance?

Perhaps Pastor Strieter’s last question was the one you raised your eyebrows at: “Are you reconciled with your neighbor, and do you wish to partake of the Holy Supper as repentant sinners?” What does being reconciled with your neighbor have to do with the Lord’s Supper? Jesus’s parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18 tells us. There one of the king’s servants was mercifully forgiven his huge debt and then he went and started throttling a fellow servant

who owed him considerably less. Jesus said that such a begrudging, vengeful person will not be forgiven.

Do you see how hypocritical it is to come to the Lord's Supper while holding a grudge? "Yes, Lord, I know that I sin against you countless times throughout the day and that you offer forgiveness in the Lord's Supper. I am coming to receive it and I expect you to forgive my many sins as you have promised. But I refuse to forgive so-and-so, who has sinned against me considerably less than I have sinned against you. That's just how it's going to be." That is what the writer to the Hebrews calls trampling the Son of God under your feet. We actually do that any time we come to the Lord's Supper with the intention of continuing in some sin or returning to some sin afterwards, whether a grudge or anything else. I remember reading an excerpt from a book once where the writer was bragging about how he and his buddies had partied hard and boozed it up on Friday and Saturday and were able to go to Communion for forgiveness on Sunday and be back at work on Monday with a clean slate. God have mercy on that writer and his friends.

So we need to ask ourselves, "Is there anyone I am refusing to forgive? Is there any sin that I am currently stuck in that I have every intention of continuing in? Is there any sin that I have taken a break from so that I can partake of Communion, but I have every intention of returning to afterwards?" If the answer is yes to any of those questions, please stay away from the Lord's Supper, but I also urge you to talk to me or another Christian you trust at the earliest opportunity so that you can take Communion again in the future.

This is the art of self-examination. These four questions sum up what we should be asking ourselves beforehand every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper: Do I confess that I am a sinner with sins that need forgiving? Do I believe that Jesus offers me forgiveness for all my sins in the Lord's Supper? Do I believe that in the Lord's Supper he miraculously gives me the actual body and blood he sacrificed for my sins? Am I holding a grudge against anyone, or is there any other sin I have no intention of giving up?

Having examined ourselves, and having found ourselves to be contrite sinners in need of and in search of precisely what Jesus offers us in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, let us come forward and joyfully and gladly receive the free, priceless, and eternal gifts that Jesus graciously gives there—forgiveness of all our sins, new life and strength to live to God's glory, and eternal salvation. Amen.