

MATTHEW 26:26–28. (EHV)

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples. He said, “Take, eat, this is my body.” Then he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it all of you, for this is my blood of the new testament, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

When Martin Luther and his colleagues and helpers were reforming the Christian church, Satan realized he needed to find a way to upset the apple cart and create division among the followers of the new movement. Up until then, he had gotten people in the visible Christian church to ignore God’s word by getting them to think that there were other legitimate sources through which God’s will was revealed besides the Scriptures. In other words, he got people *to add* to the Scriptures.

But he knew he couldn’t do that with the followers of this new movement, because the very theme of the movement itself was a return to the Scriptures as the only authoritative source for knowing the true God and his will. So instead of getting them to add to the Bible, he convinced some of them *to distort* the Bible’s clear word with regard to the two sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper. And even though discussion about baptism played a role in the new Sacramentarian Controversy, as it was called, the controversy focused mainly on Holy Communion, our doctrinal topic for today. It was primarily false teaching about Holy Communion that caused the first major rift in the Reformation movement.

This rift continues among Protestants to this day, so that, if you want to know the differences between your Lutheran denomination and some other Christian denomination, the best place to start is with the sacraments, including Holy Communion or the Lord’s Supper. And it’s probably worth mentioning that, if the first doctrines that Satan launched a major attack against, once the Reformation movement was in full swing, were the doctrines of baptism and Holy Communion, that by itself should tell us just how important these doctrines are.

This morning, let’s return to God’s clear word and look at the institution of Holy Communion or the Lord’s Supper. Similar to what we did last week with baptism, we simply want to see what Holy Communion is and what its blessings are.

1. What Holy Communion Is

Jesus instituted Holy Communion during his final Passover celebration on the night before he died on the cross. He instituted it at two separate points during the meal, the first part at the beginning of the main meal, after they had enjoyed the appetizer, and the second part after the main meal was over, as Luke makes clear.

Matthew tells us, “While they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples. He said, ‘Take, eat, this is my body.’” Luke is a little more complete, telling us that Jesus said, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

Let’s start with that last phrase: “Do this in remembrance of me.” Sometimes Jesus told his disciples to do something just once, like when he told them on Palm Sunday to go and get a donkey’s colt for him. He didn’t expect them to keep on doing that for him week after week. But here the Greek word that Jesus uses for “do” when he says, “Do this in remembrance of me,” implies that he doesn’t just want them to eat *that* bread in remembrance of him, but that he wants

them *to continue* to celebrate this new institution in remembrance of him. This is why we still celebrate and discuss the Lord's Supper today. Paul also affirms this when he tells us, as we heard in the Gospel Acclamation, that as often as we eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord's Supper, we proclaim the Lord's death *until he comes*. This meal is something Jesus wants us to preserve and celebrate until the Last Day.

And just what is it that Jesus wants us to continue to do? First of all, we note that Jesus took bread. We know that the particular bread he took was unleavened bread, because that was the only bread allowed in the Passover meal. But when the Evangelists recorded this institution, they did not make a big deal out of the fact that it was unleavened bread. There is a Greek word for unleavened bread, but the Evangelists did not use that word in connection with the Lord's Supper. They used the simple word for bread. The important thing isn't that what Jesus took was unleavened; the important thing is that it was bread. That is why believers in the early Christian church often celebrated the Lord's Supper with ordinary bread. We *could* do the same, though not everything we *could* do is something we *should* do. We would need to make sure everyone understood why, and we would also need to exercise caution for the sake of any other fellow Wisconsin Synod Lutheran guests who might be communing with us, since the customary practice throughout our church body is to use unleavened bread. I like the fact that we use unleavened bread, the same as Jesus used when he instituted the Lord's Supper. But just because I like it and because you might like it doesn't mean that it has to be that way forever. The use of any grain flour bread would be faithful to God's word and Jesus's institution.

Second, we note that Jesus set apart the bread, or consecrated it, by saying a blessing. We too want to set apart the bread with God's Word and with prayer for the purpose of celebrating his Holy Supper.

Third, we note that Jesus broke the bread. Now Luke tells us that Jesus later took the cup in the same way that he took the bread. But that certainly doesn't mean that Jesus broke the cup. It means that Jesus distributed the cup in such a way that everyone seated around the table received some of its contents. So that is also the same reason that he broke the bread, to make sure that everyone received some of it. Since our bread comes pre-broken, so to speak, since it is baked in individual wafers, we do not need to break the bread. But we do always want to make sure that we have some for each of the communicants. If I were running out of bread and only had one wafer left for two communicants, I would do the same thing Jesus did, and break that wafer so that both communicants could have some.

Fourth, Jesus gave it to his disciples. He intended this meal for Christians who believe in Jesus and who follow his Word.

Fifth, we note what Jesus said as he distributed the bread: "Take and eat; this is my body, which is given for you." Jesus first said, "Take and eat," then he said, "This is my body." In other words, it is not his body apart from our taking it and eating it. But when we do take it and eat it, Jesus says, "This is my body."

"This" refers to the bread. The bread, Jesus says, is at the same time his body. It has not ceased to be bread, but it is also something else at the same time, his body which is given for us.

Brothers and sisters, how wonderful it is to be a confessional Lutheran, a traditional Christian in the richest sense of the word "traditional"! I don't have to try and play mind games and word games with you in explaining to you what Jesus says. Here Jesus says, "This is my

body.” As a confessional Lutheran who takes Jesus at his Word, I can simply preach to you, “Jesus said it. So that’s what it is.” I don’t have to explain it to you. I can’t. I just have to preach to you what your Savior says. This is what we call the doctrine of the real presence, namely that Jesus’s actual body which he gave into death for us is really and truly present together with the bread in the Lord’s Supper.

Matthew tells us that Jesus then took the cup; Luke explains that it was after the meal. That was when the third cup of wine in the Passover celebration was usually enjoyed, and that third cup was called “the cup of blessing,” because the closing table prayer was usually spoken over it. But Jesus wanted to institute a true cup of blessing—not just a cup over which a blessing would be spoken, but a cup that would actually impart blessing.

So we again note the element first of all. The Evangelists simply call it the cup, because it was self-evident to them what was in the cup during the Passover meal. But because that wouldn’t necessarily be self-evident later on to people like us, Jesus also later referred to it as “the fruit *or* product of the vine,” which is wine. Numbers 6:4 tells us that wine is *the* product of the vine. There it refers to the grapevine as the wine-vine, because of the chief product the grapevine was and is used to produce.

We also note that Jesus again consecrated the wine by saying a blessing. And so we too consecrate the wine together with the bread.

Then Jesus distributed the cup in such a way that all his disciples could have some. We also do this by passing out individual cups of wine to the communicants. Some churches also pass out a common cup, making sure that it is full enough for everyone who has come forward. And we once again note that these communicants were his disciples. This is not simply to be some sort of complimentary handout meal for everyone.

Finally, we note what Jesus said as he offered the wine: “Drink from it all of you, for this is my blood of the new testament, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” Again, first he said “drink,” then he told them it was his blood. The wine is not his blood apart from the taking and drinking of the wine.

And again, he simply said, “This”—namely the wine—“*is* my blood of the new testament, which is poured out for many.” In a miraculous way the wine, while remaining wine, is at the same time Jesus’s actual blood which he poured out for us and for all people.

So what is Holy Communion? Martin Luther summed it up well in his Small Catechism: “It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ for us Christians to eat and to drink.”

Of course, as we have already mentioned, many even identifying as Christians would say that we are wrong about the very first part, namely that the Lord’s Supper is the true body and blood of Christ. What are the arguments they would use to deny that the bread and wine truly are Jesus’s body and blood in the Lord’s Supper?

Their arguments basically fall into two camps. The one camp is the “That doesn’t make sense” camp. I’ve mentioned Pastor Strieter before, a Lutheran pastor from the 1800s, and I said that I would have more Strieter stories in the future. He once heard a sermon by another pastor who definitely fell into this camp. That pastor preached to his audience, “I say it is not his body. Why? Because I cannot comprehend with sound reason how his body can be in the bread.” Such

people will cite different truths like the fact that a human body can only be in one place at one time, not in many places at one time, or the fact that Jesus has ascended and is sitting at the right hand of God, so his body cannot be present in Holy Communion.

But they are first and foremost ignoring Jesus's clear words, and second, they are forgetting that Jesus's human body is not like other human bodies. We only have a human nature with all its limitations, but in Jesus a human nature and a divine nature are united in one person in such a way that the human nature shares in the divine nature's characteristics. Remember that on Easter Sunday Jesus's body did a bunch of things that human bodies can't normally do, like disappear from sight, travel from place to place without walking, and travel through physical barriers. And the fact that he is now sitting at God's right hand should confirm that Jesus can be in many places at one time, because God's right hand isn't a physical GPS location, but a position of complete power and authority.

The second camp is the one that cites John 6:63: "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing." "See?" they will say, "To have the actual body of Jesus present in the Lord's Supper counts for nothing." But if they would read all of John 6, they would realize that Jesus is not talking about the Lord's Supper, since it was not even instituted yet. Jesus is telling us that eternal life only comes from the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus, and not from ourselves.

Plus, we not only have Jesus's clear words here. In the Second Lesson we heard earlier, Paul clearly said that the cup of blessing which we bless is a communion, or joint partaking, in the blood of Christ, and the bread that we break is a communion, or joint partaking, in the body of Christ. And in 1 Corinthians 11 he says that whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.

So Luther's definition of the Lord's Supper stands on the firm ground of Scripture: "It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ for us Christians to eat and to drink."

2. What Holy Communion Gives

But as important as it is to know what the Lord's Supper is, it is even more important to know what its blessings are, what God gives us through it, and to believe that we receive those gifts and blessings.

Jesus tells us very simply what those blessings are. He tells us that his body distributed with and under the bread is his body "given for you," and that his blood distributed with and under the wine is his "blood of the new testament poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Here you do not receive Jesus in his wrath over sins. Here you receive Jesus for you. Here you receive the forgiveness of sins.

Rather than re-sacrificing Jesus, as the Roman Catholic Church teaches, in Holy Communion Jesus is offering you his once-and-for-all sacrifice for sins. He is dragging it through time, from Calvary to Winner, to connect it unmistakably to you as an individual, so that you receive it to your very self. Each time you receive Holy Communion, Jesus's body and blood meets you with new and different sins on your record, and each time it assures you that Jesus's sacrifice on the cross was also for those sins, and it actually gives you forgiveness for those sins. And if your sins are forgiven, then you also have the assurance of righteousness in God's sight and of eternal life.

Now you might ask: “Jesus already gave us the forgiveness of all of our sins in our baptism, as we were reminded last week. Why then did he feel the need to institute another sacrament for the forgiveness of sins?”

That’s a fair question. Let me ask you this: Didn’t all of you who are married make solemn vows at your wedding ceremony to love and cherish your spouse until death? So does that mean that you have never told your spouse that you love him or her since then? “Honey, why do I need to say it again? I already promised that I would love you until death!” I don’t think that would fly in your marriage. No, in order to assure your spouse of your love, you continue to re-confer your love on him or her anew each day in words and actions. So too, in the Lord’s Supper, Jesus condescends to our human weakness and gives us extra assurance of the forgiveness of sins that he solemnly pledged us in our baptism.

All of this is not to say that the mere eating of the Lord’s Supper blesses us, apart from faith, or that we can simply go and do as we please and then come to the Lord’s Supper and get forgiveness and return to our life of sin as usual. The writer to the Hebrews says, “Anyone who rejected the law of Moses was put to death without pity, on the basis of the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much greater punishment do you think will be deserved by the person who trampled the Son of God underfoot, who considered insignificant the blood of the covenant, by which he was sanctified, and who insulted the Spirit of grace?” (10:28–29).

Making use of God’s grace is good. Abusing God’s grace or taking it for granted is damnable. Just as baptism isn’t just a washing away of our sins but also a giving of God’s power to have mastery over sin, so too when we come to Holy Communion and have the very price of our salvation put in our mouths and on our lips, it should not only strengthen us with the knowledge that all our sins have been paid for, but also strengthen us to say, “If Jesus went to such great lengths for me to conquer sin and the devil, then I will not let his victory be in vain, but will put his strength and victory to use in my life by striking down the devil and sin in my life.”

What is Holy Communion? “It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ for us Christians to eat and to drink.” What are its blessings? The forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation. What a priceless gift! What a miracle we get to participate in and benefit from! Let us not abuse this sacrament or its blessings or take them for granted, but let us regularly partake of the Lord’s Supper to our eternal benefit, as we have the opportunity to do once again next Sunday. Let us receive it trusting in Jesus’s words, until the day he takes us to the eternal banquet which the Lord Supper foreshadows. May he bring us safely there in his grace. Amen.