

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobnier, Illinois
Maundy Thursday A
April 9, 2020
Matthew 26:26-30

A Fast from the Feast

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." 27 And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, 28 for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. 29 I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." 30 And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. (Matthew 26:26-30 ESV)

Dear Friends in Christ:

Tonight is weird. In fact, it's unbelievable. Who would have thought we would celebrate Maundy Thursday without the Lord's Supper? It just doesn't seem right. And that's because this is the night when we again hear our Lord institute that Holy Meal.

Indeed, Jesus and His disciples were celebrating the Passover. They were eating the meal that reminded them of God's delivering their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. They remembered that all the firstborn in Egypt died that night, but that the Israelites, with the blood of a lamb on their doorposts and lintels, sheltered in place and were saved from death. Every year thereafter God wanted the Israelites to celebrate that event, celebrate His deliverance, with a meal that they might evermore trust in Him and live according to His Word.

Now Jesus gave new meaning to that meal for He was the fulfillment of everything the Passover meal signified. He Himself was the Lamb who would shed His blood so that eternal death would "pass over" all who had it sprinkled on them. He took some bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to them saying, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then He took the cup of wine, gave thanks, and offered it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." With this meal they would be delivered from slavery to their enemies of sin and death and the devil.

It's no wonder that we want to eat this meal often. We want to receive again and again that which Jesus gave His disciples on that first Maundy Thursday. When you come to the Communion table, know that you will also eat with Jesus. In, with, and under the bread and wine, you receive your Savior's very body and blood. And because Jesus gives you His actual body and blood, which He gave and poured out for you on the cross, your sins are forgiven. For, as Matthew here records it, in connection with the blood, you are receiving the "blood of the covenant."

You see, God's old covenant was sealed with sacrifices of lambs and oxen, which pointed ahead to the coming of the final sacrifice, the Lamb of God. God's new covenant was sealed with the sacrifice of the One who in just a few hours would die on a cross. So, "whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup," Paul later said, "you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). Such eating and drinking proclaims that everything Jesus did in dying on the cross He did for you.

That's why we want to receive this Meal as often as we can. We desperately need what it gives. For we know that by nature we are the betrayers and the deniers and the mockers. We know we deserve to die like the Egyptians. In fact, we know we deserve to die like Jesus did, in anguish of body and soul, despised, rejected, betrayed, denied, and mocked by man and forsaken by God. Yet Jesus invites us to eat and to drink that which gives forgiveness and life.

But this is no mere re-enactment. It is what Jesus said it is: His very Body and Blood for the forgiveness of sins. That's why we receive it with great joy.

Yet, right now we are in the midst of a fast. Who knows how long it will last? Who knows when we will once again gather as the people of God to celebrate this meal together? So what can we do?

Certainly we should wait eagerly and earnestly for the day that we can receive the supper again. We should not let the Supper's absence tempt us to downplay its importance. If it were not as important as it is, we would not feel its lack so acutely. Indeed, we are not the first in the history of the church to be forced to go without communion for a time. There were times, even in our own country, when there were no pastors available. In some places, it was, and is, illegal to be a Christian at all. Receiving the Lord's Supper was not possible.

Yet, the people who suffered under such conditions hungered for their Lord's body and blood each and every day that they lacked it. They remembered all of the promises that God makes about the Supper. They remembered that Luther said, "in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation."

And while we yearn to receive that precious meal, we are not left without God's gifts, for He comes to us in several ways, and we should respond to each and every one of them with the same eager and pious joy. As in Holy Communion, God's Word runs the whole show.

In Baptism it is Jesus' command and promise in Matthew 28 and the triune name which is united with the water. The name that was poured on you when you are baptized is still at work in you. Baptism makes you a child of God and an heir of eternal life. It saves you and unites you both to Jesus's death and His resurrection. Our lack of gathering for a time takes none of this from you.

In Absolution, your sins are forgiven in Jesus' name. This is true whether the confession is general or specific, and it's true whether you hear it from me or from one another. "Your sins are forgiven in Jesus' name" is a binding word which our Lord honors because He Himself has given it to you to say. Absolution is a gift which the Lord has given to His church.

And, of course, there is the Word itself. When you read and study the Word at home, listen to it in a service, or hear me proclaim it, the Holy Spirit is going to be at work doing just what it is that He wants done. He will convict you with His Law, and He will forgive you with His Gospel.

And while God gives His gifts so abundantly and in so many ways, pray for an end to this current plague so that we can again receive the Supper together with great joy. You see, I too long to be with you and partake of the Holy Meal with you.

So, tonight, when our Lord was betrayed into death, we rejoice that He showers us with His gifts in many ways. He won our eternal life and salvation once and for all when He suffered and died on the cross, but we receive that whenever the Holy Spirit works through the Word read, studied, heard, or proclaimed. We receive this forgiveness both in the particular gifts of Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord's Supper, and we receive it whenever the word of the Lord's promise is proclaimed and applied to us sinners.

By God's grace, together we look forward to the day we can receive this gift again. We rejoice that the Lord desires to give it. We anticipate the happy day and long for its coming. Rejoice, people loved by God. Your sins are forgiven, and you are free. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.