

Matthew 26:26-27 - Forgiveness for Us

**As they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take and eat it, this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks, he gave it to them, and said, "Drink from it, all of you. For this is my blood that establishes the covenant; it is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins."**

I heard a story about a seminary student who went to church on Maundy Thursday years ago with a friend he was visiting for Easter. When they got to church there was nothing on the altar except the fair linen, the missal stand, and the altar book. He thought, "Well, that's a bit odd. Maybe they'll bring the communion stuff out later."

Then he looked at the bulletin. The liturgy said nothing about Holy Communion and that's when it sank in. No Lord's Supper for him that night. No communion on the night our Lord instituted communion. Then came the sermon. It was worse. The pastor preached on the Lord's Supper but he suggested that it was all symbolic anyway. The Lord's body and blood weren't present at all.

At this point he was so angry he could barely think. He vowed that he would never again go to a church that didn't celebrate the Lord's Supper on the day that Jesus instituted this precious gift.

And, here we are. It's Maundy Thursday, and no communion. We are sheltering in place, and it would be impossible for me give you the Lord's Supper in a way that was both faithful to the Lord's institution and in line with the state of Arkansas' or Missouri's recommendations.

What are we to do? We love the Lord's Supper. We love the fact that on this night nearly two thousand years ago, on the night that one of His own betrayed Him, Jesus instituted a holy meal for us. He gave to the church as a meal the very body and blood which were going to be sacrificed for us on the cross.

The giving and receiving of our Lord's body and blood in His Supper has been the central act of Christian worship ever since the Lord instituted it. It is the place where the Church is most clearly and visibly constituted. Our Lord's very body and blood in our mouths for the forgiveness of sins.

We are never more the body of Christ than we are when His body is in us through the gift of Holy Communion. But right now we are in the midst of a fast. A fast that is going to continue all the way through tomorrow and even to Easter itself.

But a fast is not an evil thing when the Lord gives it, and I think we have to acknowledge that He has. God instituted the governing authorities for our good. The president, the governor, and the state health department are God's servants to protect the citizens of our county.

But Americans are fairly bad at submitting to authority, and Arkansans (and Missourians) are even worse. We chafe at not being able to do what we want to do. We read through the orders and make lists of all the loopholes, all the exceptions, all the ways we can talk ourselves into doing what we want to do even if what we want to do threatens the well-being of our neighbor.

And so, we're here, contemplating the institution of the Supper on a night we cannot receive it. So what should we do instead? I have three suggestions.

First, 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.

We are not the first in the history of the church to be forced to go without communion for a time. In colonial America, pastors were difficult to come by, and there were Lutheran communities that went without the supper for fifty years or more. In the Ukraine during the Soviet dominance there was an unordained deacon who cared for the small Lutheran church in his town with nothing but the text of the Small Catechism that he had memorized as a child. It wasn't until after the Iron Curtain fell that his little congregation received the supper.

The people who suffered under these conditions hungered for their Lord's body and blood each and every day that they lacked it. They remembered 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."*

The fact that these Christians could also receive the forgiveness of sins through baptism, absolution, and the proclaimed Word did not make them miss the Supper any less. When a Christian knows that the Lord desires to give a gift, they desire to receive that gift. Jesus says, "I want to give eternal life and salvation to you in this way!" The Christian says, "Yes, please!"

But we do not just respond to the Supper in this way. God comes to us in several ways, and we should respond to every one of them with the same eager and pious joy. This is the second way we can rightly respond to the fast which the Lord has imposed on us: We should rejoice in all the other gifts that the Lord is giving.

You've all heard the phrases "means of grace" and "Word and Sacrament." Each of these phrases is meant to identify the particular ways in which the Lord has promised to deliver His good gifts to you. The Lord's Supper is one of these. God unites His Word of promise and institution to common bread and common wine, and when you receive these gifts, you receive with them the body and blood of Jesus, the forgiveness of sins, and eternal life and salvation.

The operative thing is the promise of God. In the Supper, the promise is attached to the bread which is Jesus's body and the wine which is His blood. In the other means of grace, the Word is also what runs the whole show.

In Baptism it is Jesus's 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. Peter teaches us that it literally saves you. Paul says that your baptism 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. "I forgive you 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 study the Word at home, listen to it in a service, or hear your pastor 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.

One of Luther's key insights into this was that the Word both does what it says and says what it does. And so, while we all feel the lack of the Supper, we can rejoice in the certainty that attends to the Lord's Word whenever it is delivered to you. I encourage you to pray for an end to this current plague so that we can again receive the Supper with great joy together.

And so, tonight, on this night 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 studied, heard or proclaimed. We receive this forgiveness both in the 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.

And so, together we look forward to the day we can receive this gift together 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.