

Divine Service Part I

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Today's message is going to be more like a Bible Study. In the past, we have done a narrative Divine Service where I would explain a portion of the Divine service, and then we do it. Today will be a bit different. We are going to look at the first portion of the Divine Service and why we do what we do. It is my prayer that you will begin to develop an even deeper appreciation of what we do during the service, and see it as the rich blessing from God that it truly is. It is not our doing, nor our work for God, but it is first His work for us and to us – only then do we respond. Our responses are only His Word of promise to us, repeated back to Him.

Our hymn does not really begin the service, it is more a prelude to it – if you consider the text, it will reflect either the theology of the invocation, or begin to set the theme of the day, based upon the Scripture lessons appointed.

Whose house are we in this morning? God's house! We are gathered together for the family meal at His request and invitation. We are gathered to receive wonderful gifts from Him. God's name, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and the use of the sign of the holy cross, were first spoken and used upon each of us in our baptism. These words confess that this God calls His people together by Word and Sacrament. It is His name we share – we are his family in Christ. Those words are confused when good-intentioned ministers pervert the invocation by adding the words, "We make our beginning" to the invocation. It is not we who begin, but it is God who begins a good work in us.

We come together not because of what we have done, but because of what God has done to us. He calls us through His Holy Spirit, for it is His Spirit which calls us, gathers us together, and enlightens us with His holy gifts. It is this Spirit which keeps us in Christ, for it is the Spirit who works faith in us as we hear the Word of Christ and receive Christ's body and blood. It is by these gifts we are granted forgiveness – covered in the holiness and purity of Christ, whereby His righteousness becomes ours.

When we gather together then, while we pray that non-Christians be present so that they might hear of the wonderful works of God, our gathering together for corporate worship is primarily a family gathering. You and I have been united to Christ, we are one body with Him, joined to our Lord by the Holy Spirit's work in baptism – buried with Christ and raised with him as a new creation in Him. Each time those words are spoken, we remember that God called us by name with those words and made us His own.

Following the invocation is the Confession and Absolution. Even when you come home, what do parents often tell you before you come into the house? "Take off your shoes!" Or, at the very least, "Wipe your feet!" When the LORD saw that Moses turned aside to look (at the burning bush), God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then He said, "Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

You are the family gathered in your Father's house. You are on holy ground! You cannot sit at the dinner table filthy and unclean. So, it is time to remove that which is most filthy. When someone came to the home of another, there were no paved roads or cement sidewalks, walking was a dusty undertaking. The filthiest part of a person was their feet. Jesus even washed his disciple's feet on Holy Thursday before He instituted the Lord's Supper.

Our baptismal life is one of daily contrition and repentance; a life of daily sorrow for our sins, a desire to amend our sinful life, and trust that in Christ Jesus our sins are forgiven – totally and completely gone.

We gather then to be in that continual repentance. In John's first letter, we learn the importance of confession and absolution. *If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* (1 John 1:8-9)

Jesus also tells His disciples that He will give them the authority to forgive sins. Do you remember the scene? He had asked them who did the people say that He was. *Then He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are 'he Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."* (Matt. 16:15-19)

That authority to forgive and retain sins was purchased when Christ gave His perfect and holy life unto death upon the cross. And when He arose on the third day, one of His first priorities was to give those whom He was sending out as His ministers, the authority to forgive sins – the authority to pronounce forgiveness.

It was that first Easter that it took place. *So when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord. So Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you." And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained."* John 20:19-23

Christ's command is to forgive sins. It is His blood which covers all sin and cleanses the baptismal robe and makes it white in the blood of the Lamb. And it happens when the pastor speaks the very Word that Christ commanded He speak by Christ's own blood bought authority.

Dear friends in Christ, do you understand the riches of God's grace showered upon you in the first couple minutes of the Divine Service? You are again reminded of your baptism, where God

called you by name and made you His own. You are blessed to make the sign of the Holy Cross, a remembrance of the price paid by God's own Son to purchase you as His very own.

You are invited by God to bring before Him all your sins. He wants them, not so He can punish you for them – for the punishment they deserve has already been meted out upon another, One more holy and righteous than you – He wants you to confess them so that He can lift the burden of them from your heavy heart. Jesus encourages you, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matt. 11:28-29)

This is not time for you to come before God as if it is a time to give Him something, as if we had anything that He needs. This is the time and the place where those who are weary with the trials and tribulations of life come to find rest and peace. This is a time of rest and refreshment in our wilderness journey of this earthly life. Here in this house is where the children come to be comforted and blessed by the gifts of their heavenly Father, given in the work of Christ, and sealed in us by the Holy Spirit.

It is again friends, a glorious day to gather together with our family and hear Christ's work applied to us. What a gracious and loving God we have who speaks to us words of forgiveness, words which grant salvation and bestow life eternal. Thanks be to God, in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.