

Divine Service Part III

We pray Luther's Prayer before the sermon: Eternal God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, give us Your Holy Spirit who writes the preached Word into our hearts. May we receive and believe it and be cheered and comforted by it in eternity. Glorify Your Word in our hearts and make it so bright and warm that we may find pleasure in it, through Your Holy Spirit think what is right, and by Your power, fulfill the Word, for the sake of Jesus Christ, Your Son our Lord. Amen.

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

For the last two weeks we have had a Bible Study in place of the sermon. This was done for a dual purpose, to give people the idea that Bible Study might be enjoyable (and they might want to join), and because God's children need to understand the great benefit and gifts given in the Divine Service.

Today will be the last Study to replace the sermon. Our topic is the Service of the Sacrament, the third part of the Divine Service.

If I were to ask what is the most visible evidence of Christ's presence in our midst this morning, what would you say that it is? Is it the cross? How about the stained glass? The statue? No! No! No!

How about if I ask it this way, Is Christ physically present in any way or form this morning?

His body and His blood will soon be on our altar – not a symbol of Christ, not a representation of Him – the very body of Christ which was pierced for you, and the very precious and holy blood of Christ shed for you, is what you will see, touch, taste, eat, and drink. This is the greatest manifest visitation of God to His people.

On that first Easter, a couple disciples walked with Jesus to Emmaus, but they did not recognize Him as He was talking with them on the road. But, when they got to their destination and they sat down for a meal, they finally recognized Him in the breaking of the bread.

Dear friends, the importance of this meal is show us in the Book of Acts. We learn there that they celebrated the Breaking of the Bread – the Lord's Supper – on every first day of the week. In our Lutheran Confessions, the book which our congregational constitution says is the rule and norm of our Christian faith and life, says that in Luther's day they celebrated the Lord's Supper on every Lord's day, every first day of the week.

Christ's body, Christ's blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Can it be meaningless? Could we take it too often? Can we make it impotent so that it loses all power? Of course not! Whether we believe it or not, it is those things and gives those things.

We can however take it to our judgment if we do not know what we are doing, or if we do it carelessly and thoughtlessly. This is not a problem with the Lord's Supper though, that would be a problem with us.

Let us begin our examination of the Service of the Sacrament. Standing in reverence to our holy and gracious God, at the end of the “Prayer of the Church,” the service continues with the Preface. Again, the pastor greets the people with God’s Word. At his speaking the reality happens, “the Lord be with you.” Again, God’s people respond and speak the reality back upon their shepherd, “and with thy Sprit,” and only as the Spirit is upon us do we lift up our hearts and give thanks to God. We do this singing the Sanctus, proclaiming what is true about God – that He is holy – and that He comes to us.

Knowing the gracious nature of God, His willingness to come to us and give us His merciful gifts, we pray our table prayer, the very prayer that Jesus gave us to pray. We could talk about this prayer, but there is a whole Lenten series wrapped up in this short prayer. Maybe I should use that again some time as a Lenten series.

It is following this prayer that the pastor repeats the very words of Christ when He first instituted this supper. Christ’s own words bring about the very reality they state – His body is now present; His blood is now present – they are before us that we might eat and that we might drink. They are before us that we might eat and drink for the forgiveness of sins. They are before us that Christ might come to us in the most intimate way possible.

It is why after the consecration, the pastor holds up the host and the chalice before his face and faces the congregation and proclaims, “the peace of the Lord be with you.” It is not the pastor’s peace you are receiving, it is Christ. It is Christ who is the peace which fills you, who keeps you in all the trials and tribulations of this life. It is Christ who fills you with Himself and removes the terror of sin.

Knowing Christ is coming to you, you beg of Him mercy, recognizing Him in this meal. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world – the Lamb of God who takes away your sin. This is Christ who has died for you. He is now coming to you, to feed you and nourish you.

And yet, you are not alone. You are gathered at the table with those who believe as you do, there is a unity at this table that is closer than no other. Those who believe differently, those who do not understand, those who deny certain truths are not united with us, and so, they do not belong at this table. Neither do those who do not believe that they need forgiveness, especially those who deny that what God calls sin, is sin. Their impenitence makes a mockery of Christ’s sacrifice, and poisons this meal.

Knowing what we are receiving, and that we are gathered with our closest family members, our blood-bought family, it is then that we eat and drink. This is *the most* holy meal. This food was purchased at the greatest expense, not with gold or silver, but with the holy precious blood and the innocent suffering and death of Gods Christ. Amen!

This eating and drinking is the highlight of the entire service. This is food that nourishes body and soul, for we are redeemed by Christ to join Him for eternity in His kingdom in glorified flesh. So, this meal preserves and strengthens us in body and soul, keeping us in the true faith until that day. Having communed upon Christ, we can depart in peace!

It is why we sing the words Simeon sang in the temple after holding the infant Christ; Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

For this most incredible gift, for receiving from God's own hand the very body and blood of His own Son for our forgiveness, we give Him most hearty thanks. This meal strengthens us not only in faith toward God, but it strengthens us in forgiveness – so that we might love one another even as He has loved us.

But God is not finished with us yet. He desires to give us one last blessing before we leave His house.

Again, for the third time, pastor and congregation bless one another. The Lord be with you – and with thy spirit. Bless we the Lord – thanks be to God! We have God with us, His Spirit fills us, so we bless and thank our holy God for the incredibly merciful gifts that He has showered down upon us.

But there is one last thing to happen in the service. It is not from us to God, but it is from God to us. One last time He comes to us, *and* gives us the same blessing that He has given His church for countless generations. We call it the Aaronic blessing, I think you'll understand why when you hear what took place when God **COMMANDED** this blessing to be spoken.

In Numbers 6, God gave this blessing to Moses. *The Lord spoke to Moses saying, "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, "thus you shall bless the sons of Israel. You shall say to them: The Lord bless you and keep you; The Lord make His face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; The Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace. So shall they invoke My name on the sons of Israel, and I will bless them."* A man speaks as He was commanded to speak by God, and God puts His name upon you, claiming you as His own. You have done and you do nothing, it is God who works. At this word spoken by God's chosen instrument, His pastors, He blesses you, keeps you, makes His face to shine upon you, is gracious to you, and gives you peace.

God's name begins the service. God's name ends the service. God continually blesses, bestowing countless gifts in the service – it is therefore His service. It is not our service, it is His. We are the invited guests who are given His name, called by His name, gathered by His name, commune upon His flesh and blood, and are blessed in His name.

Until we join in the eternal heavenly banquet feast, we join Christ in this feast that He sets before us. Let us rejoice and be glad that He Himself comes to us, and care for us in such an intimate way. Amen.