

Marks of the Church: the Lord's Supper

In the name of him whose flesh is true food and whose blood is true drink, dear friends in Christ: In this series of Lenten meditations we've been dealing with a peculiar aspect of the Holy Christian Church on earth. It's this: though we can *define* what the Church is, namely all those people who trust in Christ Jesus and the atonement he made for sin by his passion, death, and resurrection, what we can't do is see the Church because no one can see what another person believes. So, the Church itself is invisible. We can't see it. That being the case, how can we know where it is? The answer is that the Church is made manifest in its marks – in things the Church possesses that *can* be seen or experienced, but that are not the Church itself. Luther identified seven such marks.

Thus far we have considered two of them. The first is the Word of God. Where the Word is being read and proclaimed, where it is being taught in its truth and purity, there the Church must be because it is by the Word that the Holy Spirit brings people to faith in Christ and keeps and sanctifies them in it. The second mark that we looked at last week is Holy Baptism, which we might think of as the doorway or the entry point into the Church. If you see Baptisms going on, you know the Church must be there. And again, it's because the Holy Spirit works through Baptism, which is water combined with God's Word, to regenerate, to cleanse from sin, and to spiritually open the eyes of those who receive it.

This evening we come to the third mark of the Church, which even without the last hymn, the readings, and the portion we read from the Catechism you could have guessed is the Lord's Supper. It's rather obvious: the first three marks naturally hang together: the Word and the two Sacraments – the two Sacraments which are nothing more than the Word of God combined with physical elements and that include God's promise. (Ah, but it does make one wonder where we are going to find the other four remaining marks, doesn't it? Sorry, no hints. You'll just have to show up and find out.)

For now, however, we're looking at the Lord's Supper, alternately known as the Sacrament of the Altar, Holy Communion, and the Eucharist – the last of which comes from a Greek word that means "thanksgiving". What is the Lord's Supper? We answered that earlier with the words of the Catechism: "It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ himself for us Christians to eat and drink." Why? To give us full assurance that our sins are forgiven and that therefore we have life and salvation. And really, what could give us more assurance of that than to actually receive into ourselves the Lord's very body and blood that were sacrificed to save us? It is the ongoing, living, breathing proof of our peace with God. What Isaiah saw in prophetic foreshadow when an angel touched his lips with a burning coal taken from the altar and by it declared his guilt taken away and his sins atoned for, we have in fulfillment when God's appointed messenger presses to our lips what he has taken from the altar: God's saving gift to us of Christ's body and blood.

And as St. Paul says, it's an *ongoing* gift: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." This is one of the main ways this Sacrament differs from Baptism, which is a onetime thing. That makes sense: you only get born once, but you have to eat regularly thereafter. So, in Baptism you are reborn once, and after that you partake of Holy Communion on a regular basis. Another difference is that Baptism is applied to individuals; Communion, by definition, is a group undertaking. Baptism

makes one part of the body of Christ; in the Supper we show and fellowship *together* in our unity in the body of Christ.

And I suppose that it is precisely because Christ gave it to us as a Sacrament of unity with him and one another that the enemy has chosen to attack it and make it one of the most divisive issues in the Holy Christian Church. On one end of the spectrum there are those who deny Christ's clear words, "This is my body ... This is my blood." They say he can't possibly mean it, and therefore his words must be taken figuratively. The elements only *symbolize* his body and blood and the Sacrament itself is intended to be nothing more than an aid to memory. Thus they rob themselves of the assurance of Christ's presence in, with, and under the elements, and of the Sacrament's true comfort and significance. On the other end of the spectrum there are those who don't deny our Lord's words, who do acknowledge that Christ's body and blood are truly present in the Sacrament, but who misunderstand the *reason* they are there. These see the Sacrament as a means to offer to God repeatedly an unbloody re-sacrifice of Jesus that earns more merit to cancel the penalty of sins – as if Christ with his giving of himself on the cross the first time didn't fully complete the mission. We have to keep sacrificing Jesus to the Father over and over again, and each time we do we earn more merit in his eyes. This distorted view leads in turn to a number of other abuses of the Sacrament that would require the patience of Job to endure listening to. Suffice it to say that it's best that we simply stick with and believe Christ and his words: This is my body given for you; this is my blood shed for the forgiveness of sins. There's no reason to subtract from that or to add to it any silly manmade notions.

Another issue that divides the Church on the issue of the Supper is the question of who may administer the Sacrament. You may know that the Roman Catholic Church insists that only a duly consecrated priest in their fellowship may do it. In their view it's not the spoken Word of God that effects Christ's presence in the Sacrament, but rather a special power bestowed upon the priest when he was ordained. He says the words and something amazing happens. You or I or anyone else speaks the same words, nothing. But where does the Holy Scripture locate God's power? In certain specially chosen individuals or in God's Word? You know the answer: God always works through his Word.

A similar question arises if we ask whether the person administering the Sacrament is an unbeliever or a wicked person who is involved in ongoing and unrepentant sin. Can such a man effectively consecrate the elements? Or do they remain simple bread and wine because the guy administering them is in some way unqualified? The answer is the same as before: it's not the man who makes the Sacrament what it is; rather it is God through his powerful Word. Thus we can be confident that we are receiving the gifts and benefits of the Sacrament regardless of the faith or moral standing of the man who consecrates and distributes it.

Now, these questions thus far address the validity of the Sacrament. Another set of questions concern who may receive it to their benefit. St. Paul warns against the sin of eating and drinking the Sacrament in an unworthy manner. How do you know if you are worthy? The answer has two parts: first is the matter of self examination. You ask yourself, "Am I a sinner? Do I confess and repent of my sins?" If you answer, "Yes", that's good. Because the Sacrament is for sinners. It's not for those who deny their sins or who refuse to repent. That would make you unworthy and guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. And if I knew you were unworthy and gave it to you anyway, I'd be guilty of inflicting spiritual harm on you. I don't want to do that. The second part of the answer is the matter of belief. You ask yourself, "Do I believe that Jesus gives me his true body and blood under bread and wine for the forgiveness of my sins – just like he says?" If you answer "Yes", you are worthy to receive. If

you answer, "No, I think this is something else, perhaps a symbolic expression of fellowship with other like-minded people or a mere a ritual of remembrance of what Jesus did a long, long time ago", well, then you best sit it out, because to partake with such lack of faith in the Lord's words also makes you guilty of sinning against the body and blood of Christ and brings his judgment down on you.

A final consideration when deciding where and with whom to commune goes to the issue of what public confession of your faith you are making by doing so. As we've seen, the Lord's Supper is a group event. Those who commune at an altar are by their participation publicly confessing the faith of the group that regularly gathers around that altar; not just their view of the Lord's Supper, but all articles of the Christian faith and its teachings on morality. Again, no one can see your faith; but what we can see is your public confession of faith made manifest by where and with whom you commune. If you partake of the Lord's Supper in a fellowship of believers where it is taught that Christ is not truly present in the Sacrament, or that believes it to be a re-sacrifice of Jesus to earn more merit before God, or that embraces and celebrates the whole LGBTQ agenda, then you are by your actions owning those errors and showing your agreement with them. This is a big reason for our practice of close communion. We want to make sure that those who commune here don't give false witness to their faith, but actually believe and embrace the Christian faith as it is explained in the Lutheran Confessions.

More could be said, and we could go over a hundred "What if" questions; but let this suffice for now. We have the Word of God in its truth and purity. We have Holy Baptism. And we have the Sacrament of the Altar, the third mark of the Church; and therefore we know that the Church is here in our midst. Let's recognize, celebrate, and give thanks to God for that. And let's believe the words of our Lord Jesus, "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever." In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!