

Text: 1 Corinthians 11:23-29
Songs of the Passion Series



Maundy Thursday
Hymn: *The Death of Jesus Christ, Our Lord*

Worthy of Celebration

In the name of him who gives us his body to eat and his blood drink, dear friends in Christ: Some weeks ago, when we began this series of devotions based upon some of classic hymns of the Lenten season, I noted that very early in the Reformation of the church, Martin Luther seized upon the idea of using hymns and congregational singing to help people learn and retain the substance of the Christian faith. Prior to his time, the people sitting in the pews just didn't sing in church. Nor at that time could most people read. And what Luther was sad to discover as he traveled around Germany visiting the churches was that most lay people (or their pastors, for that matter) didn't have a very good grasp of what the Christian faith was all about. Luther wanted people to know. He knew it was necessary for their individual salvation, of course; but beyond that, he knew that unless the average guy or gal sitting in the church had a solid grip on the essential articles of the faith, they were susceptible to being led astray again. He didn't want the precious truths of the Gospel that he and so many others had fought so hard to restore to the church to be lost again only a generation or two later.

To help prevent that from happening he did several things. First, he pushed for widespread education for the masses – which was quite a radical concept in his day. Back then very few people had any schooling at all. Secondly, he wrote the Small and Large Catechisms, the first of which most of you committed to memory once upon a time. It was designed to be a short and easy to memorize overview of the most important (or chief) parts of the Christian faith. The idea was that even if you couldn't read, just by hearing the catechism taught several times, you could have it down pretty well. Then afterward, if you heard someone teaching something that didn't quite square with what you had been taught, you'd know to reject it. And like I said before, a third thing Luther did was to write hymns for people to sing. These hymns had a definite purpose. They weren't designed to make people feel good or to showcase their singing talents or simply to fill up the space between parts of the worship service. They were designed to reinforce the truths of the Christian faith. They were, in a sense, meant to be the catechism set to music; again, so that people would know *what* they believed and *why* they believed it.

Following the pattern he established, many more accomplished Lutheran hymn writers emerged in the years that followed. In fact, the period 1600 to around 1750 has sometimes been called the golden age of Lutheran hymns. And it was the use in the churches of this solid core of hymnody, hymns that simply told Bible stories or that taught the truths of the catechism that gave the Lutheran church the nickname "the singing church". Remember that during the same period, neither Roman Catholics nor other Protestants had yet introduced congregational singing to their services. So when they called us the "singing church", they didn't mean it as a compliment. Ah, but they came around in the end, didn't they?

In any case, this evening's hymn selection falls quite nicely into the classic Lutheran tradition. It is a very simple and straightforward meditation on the Lord's Supper. Its lyrics proclaim exactly *what* we're doing when we participate in the Supper and *why* doing it. In fact, since you probably still have the catechism committed to memory, it should be fairly easy to see that the hymn verses pretty much follow its outline.

The first three verses simply expound the basic truths of the Gospel; namely that Jesus Christ, God's Son, suffered and died on the cross for our sins. After that, the answer to the first

catechism question, “What is the Lord’s Supper?” is given. It’s in verse four: “in this Supper we receive his very body [and] his blood for sinners shed”. To the question, “What is the benefit of this eating and drinking?” the answer is given rather poetically in verse five. It explains how the assurance of forgiveness we receive through the Lord’s Supper is food for the soul that sustains us on our journey heavenward. Then verses six, seven, and eight give the answer to the catechism question, “Who receives this sacrament worthily?” So all the answers are here and they’re very neatly laid out for us. That’s what makes this a fine Lutheran hymn.

However, like several of our older hymns, it’s not without a couple potential problems. You see, it sometimes happens because words change their meaning and usage over time that what a writer meant to say when he wrote something isn’t what’s understood by people who read or sing his words many years later. So for example, the word *celebrate* is used in the first verse. And today when we speak of *celebrating* something, we tend to think of a happy, upbeat, party-like atmosphere. Maybe it’s because of that once ubiquitous song by Kool and the Gang that goes “Celebrate good times, come on”. However it happened, these days we *celebrate* birthdays and graduations and promotions, that sort of thing; but we would never think about *celebrating* more serious or sober matters. On account of it, it sounds awfully strange to the modern ear to say that we *celebrate* the death of Jesus Christ our Lord.

But it turns out that the English word *celebrate* has its roots in a Latin word that means “to fill” or “to fill up”. And back in former times when people looked at the calendar they wanted to know which days were the days of celebration, that is, the days on which the church had some special observance going on, be it a high holy day like Christmas or Easter, or one of the other holy days like say, the Annunciation, or the Presentation, or the day of one of the Saints. Whatever the occasion was, you could bet that there would be a special church service on that day that included the Mass, that is, the Lord’s Supper; and so they would say that the day was *filled* – or *celebrated* – by the Mass. From there it was but a small step to extend the use of the word to mean the actual event of and participation in the Lord’s Supper. And so it became popular usage to speak of celebrating the Lord’s Supper – without there being any connotation of party-like revelry. We still use the word that way today; though it does throw some people off a bit when we do. In any case, that’s what it means in the hymn. Where it says “The death of Jesus Christ our Lord, we celebrate with one accord” it means, “We are now participating together in the Lord’s Supper – by which, as St. Paul says, we show the Lord’s death until he comes. And furthermore we are doing it in ‘one accord’, that is, united in one common confession about what it is that we’re doing and why we’re doing it.”

Okay, another pair of words that tend to trip people up a bit when we talk about the Lord’s Supper and that also appear in this hymn are *worthy* and *unworthy*. The way they are commonly used today, these words are charged with some subjective and maybe even emotional force. When we say someone is worthy of something we think in terms of their being good enough or deserving of the honor. Worthy is good. If someone is unworthy, on the other hand, it means they are morally unfit or not qualified or incompetent. Unworthy is bad.

So, when we speak of someone being worthy to take the Lord’s Supper, it sounds like we’re saying that they’re good enough. It’s like they’ve met some level of moral goodness that makes them qualified. And if we say someone is unworthy, it sounds like we’re saying that they’re just too sinful. They don’t get to have the Lord’s Supper because they don’t measure up. They’re not as good as us.

But that’s not what we mean at all. The Lord Jesus didn’t die for good people. He died for sinners – even the worst of them. That’s what the Lord’s Supper is all about: God giving us

the gift of his Son – his body and blood offered up as the atoning sacrifice for sin – and giving him specifically to those who are in every respect morally unworthy to receive any good thing from God's hand. If anyone thinks he's good enough to have the Lord's Supper, he is most certainly unworthy.

So, what makes a person worthy to receive the Sacrament? It pretty much bubbles down to whether or not the person is in fact "in one accord" with the Lord and the rest of the congregation in both his confession of sin and his understanding of what's actually happening in the Sacrament. St. Paul lays down the criteria in the passage we heard earlier. First he says, "Let a man examine himself". That is, he needs to look at his life and behavior and ask, "Am I a sinner in need of God's grace and forgiveness? Do I fear God's righteous judgments against me? Do I repent of my sins? Do I need the strengthening of faith that God gives through this Sacrament to amend my life and help me to overcome temptation? If the answer to those questions is "Yes", you're well on your way to being worthy to take the Lord's Supper.

But you're not there yet. St. Paul continues, "anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself." What he's saying is that someone who participates in the Supper in unbelief or in ignorance or without repentance is sinning against the Lord and what it is he's offering to us in the Sacrament: his own body and blood. That person is using the Lord's body in an inappropriate way, in a way that denies Christ's clear Word and purpose. Such a person is sinning against the Lord's body, and is therefore, unworthy. So a person who wants to know if he's worthy to participate should ask, "Do I believe that in the Sacrament of the Altar the body and blood of Christ are truly being given to me? Do I believe that it's not just a picture or symbol or allegory; but that by the power of God's Word the true body and blood of Christ are indeed mysteriously present in, with, and under the sacramental elements of bread and wine? And do I trust that by eating and drinking them, the Lord Jesus Christ is literally feeding me with himself, and in this way assuring me of his forgiveness? A person who answers "Yes" to those questions is worthy.

Concerns over who is or is not worthy to participate are the major reasons the Christian Church has long practiced Closed Communion. We limit participation to those who are able to examine themselves, who are not involved in known unrepentant sins, who do not stubbornly cling to false doctrines, and who share our confession of what Christ our Lord says this holy Sacrament is. If someone is evaluated to be unworthy by those standards, we're not saying that they're more sinful than anyone else or that they're not as good as us. What we're saying is that we care enough about them to prevent them from sinning against the Lord and bringing judgment upon themselves by taking the Supper without being properly prepared.

Now, some people are upset or offended by that. In response, let me say these two things: first, if they are upset or offended at being asked to refrain from communing, it only shows that they really don't understand the importance of being "in one accord" in the confession of the Christian faith with whom they would be taking the Supper – and therefore it proves that they aren't worthy to commune to begin with. Secondly, it needs to be said that we who know better should not allow their misunderstanding and/or anger over being denied communion to cause us to lower our level of concern for them. You don't let children play with matches because they might hurt themselves and do serious damage to the house. It doesn't matter how much they want to play with the matches, or how much kicking and crying they do, or how they try to manipulate you by saying things like, "You don't love me! You never let me do what I want!" The loving parent gives a firm and unwavering "no". It's the weak, unconcerned parent, or the one who foolishly denies that there's any danger who gives in. Now, I'm not saying that people who don't understand the Sacrament are children. What I'm saying is

this: If you wouldn't give a child matches to play with, how could you possibly give the Lord's body to someone you know will receive the Lord's judgment by it? It doesn't make sense.

Of course our hope is that by taking the time to teach and explain our Lord's Words and his institution of the Sacrament, those who do not understand, or who don't believe, or who are unrepentant will become properly prepared and therefore worthy to commune. In this way we will be truly one with them in common confession of Jesus Christ and his work of salvation. And we will be one with them as we receive the blessings and benefits of Jesus' body and blood given and shed for the forgiveness of sins when together we worthily celebrate the Lord's Supper.

That we might attain that goal and be properly prepared ourselves, let's ask the Lord's grace, and pray together the last verse of the hymn:

Help us sincerely to believe
That we may worthily receive
Your Supper and in You find rest.
Amen, they who believe are blest.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!