

Do This Often
Maundy Thursday
April 9, 2020

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23 For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” 25 In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Dear Christian Friends,

A strange night this is. A meal at the very heart of our faith has been determined by the world to be non-essential. Or to be a little more kind about it, our society has decided that with regard to congregating and communing this week, the risks outweigh the benefits. For some Christians it's a small price to pay, and for others of us it's a bitter pill to swallow. For some, it's a small matter, and for others of us, it's a big deal.

Our Lord's Supper was a big deal in the little church where I grew up in Barney, North Dakota. For several reasons. 1) we had a six-year confirmation program. I'm not kidding. Every Saturday morning during every school year, grades 3-6, we didn't just study Bible history, we studied advanced Bible history, we didn't just memorize a few Bible verses and a couple of Psalms, we memorized 703 King James Version Bible verses out of the 1941 Small Catechism with explanation, and 2) Mainly we were instructed in such a way as to look forward to that first communion as surely as young person might look forward to getting married. Many of you out there in radio and Facebook land tonight, especially if you're not a spring chicken anymore, know exactly what I'm talking about.

The Institution of the Lord's Supper as recorded in I Corinthians are before us tonight. These words are like a diamond dropped in a muddy road. One of the most beautiful passages in all of Scripture is given in the middle of Paul rebuking the early Christians in Corinth for their worldly and selfish and insensitive attitudes and behavior. They couldn't even do a fellowship meal followed by Holy Communion right. Some were getting drunk, the rich folks weren't sharing their food with the poor, they had turned a meal meant to be pure good news into a meal that irritated and divided.

Scholars agree that I Corinthians was likely written before any of the Gospels. If that is true, this would be the first written down account of the Lord's Supper. The historical setting was that this was the night in which Jesus was betrayed, arrested, and put on trial. The Passover meal would begin with the host pronouncing a blessing over the first cup of red wine and passing it around. Actually, four cups of wine would be passed around during the meal. Families in small groups would drink the first cup, then there would be bitter herbs dipped in a fruit sauce - for the Israelites, it would call to mind the bitterness of slavery in Egypt. For us tonight, it calls to mind the bitter pill we are swallowing tonight, kept away from our sanctuaries, denied the privilege of eating and drinking at the table, as is our habit.

Then the first part of a hymn, the Hallel, (Psalm 113-118), would be sung, then a second cup would be passed, then the host would break and pass around the unleavened bread, then the meal itself including roasted sacrificial lamb, then prayer, then a third cup would be passed, then the second part of the Hallel, then a fourth cup which would celebrate the kingdom yet to come, would be drunk in conclusion.

It was the third cup that Jesus blessed and became the cup of New Testament communion. Listen again to these words of institution, **In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new testament in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.**

In Egypt, the unleavened bread was a sign that Israel needed to leave in haste, and that God Almighty would be leading the way. In this new meal, the bread is in communion the very body of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. To the Jewish mind, the body of Jesus represented not just his physical body, but the great mystery of his life, all of his teaching, and all that he did. As often as you eat this bread with repentant and believing hearts, that often, dear people of God, the body of Jesus himself is being delivered into your heart, your mind, and your soul. I can't explain it, but I can invite you to believe it and to celebrate it and to ask a simply question about this eating - Could life here on earth get any better?

In Egypt, the cup of wine brought to mind the blood of the lamb smeared on doorposts back in Egypt. In the new meal, the wine is in communion with the very blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The old covenant was ratified repeatedly by the blood of animals offered by men, but the new covenant has been ratified once and for all by the blood of Jesus Christ. The Old deliverance was merely from Egypt to Canaan. The new deliverance is from this day forward from sin to salvation, it is from guilt to innocence, it is from tiredness to being up and at it, it is from Satan's realm to God's heaven, it is from death unto life.

In the Old Testament the Lord told his people where to worship, how to worship, what to bring as a sacrifice, he told them how often to do it, in other words, he treated them as children, spelling out every step of the way what they are to be doing. In the New Testament he treats us as mature children. He makes it clear we are to develop the habits of worshipping and communing, but he doesn't lay down the specific rules. He tells us to come to the Table often, and he leaves it up to us to figure out how often is often.

In the early church, often meant every Sunday. At one point in our church history, a lot of Lutherans went down to four times a year. When I grew up in the 60's, at least in our little corner of the world, it was once a month. My dear Grandma Griffin who was a devout

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Roman Catholic, went to mass daily, at least in her later years. Here at St. Paul Lutheran, at least in normal times, we choose to define often as every Sunday.

Which brings us back to the original point I made - there are at least two kinds of Christians these days, it seems to me, those who are hungry and thirst for the Supper and those not particularly fired up about it.

If you are not hungry and thirsty for your Lord's Supper, Luther has three suggestions for you. First, he says that no better advice can be given than that you put your hand into your bosom, and feel whether or not you still have flesh and blood. Secondly, if that doesn't do it, loko around to see whether you're in the world or not, and keep in mind that there will never be a lack of sins and trouble. And third, if that doesn't make you feel the need for Holy Communion, remember that you will certainly have the devil after you, he will be lying and he will be causing all kind of trouble day and night, and the last thing in the world the devil wants you to have is peace.

Peace, of course, is exactly what Jesus Christ wants us to have tonight. Even though we find ourselves staying away from our beautiful sanctuaries, even though it's not possible for us to receive our favorite meal tonight, we know that wherever two or three are gathered in the Name of Jesus, there he is in the midst of us, really present. Present in the preaching and the teaching and the remembering of God's Word. Present in the words of absolution spoken by pastors all across the globe tonight, as if Jesus spoke them himself.

One question, three answers, and three stories in closing tonight. Again, our theme is "Do this often." And our final question is why we should receive our Lord's Supper frequently instead of just once in a while. Three answers we offer, 1) because Christ commands us to come often, 2) because Christ promises to bless us every time we come, and 3) because we need what Christ is giving us in this Supper.

First, We should do this often because Christ commands us to do so. In the famous words of Nike, just do it. Do this supper as a way of remembering the life and the death and the resurrection of Christ for you. Do this supper as a way of being in fellowship with folks who believe the same way you believe. Do this supper as a way of proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes again. Do this supper as a way of tasting heaven here on earth.

The kingdom of God is like an elderly couple who is still doing what their parents did, and before that their grandparents, all the way back into the old country. On Saturday night they review the Ten Commandments as a way of looking into the mirror and remembering how seriously they have sinned, how fragile has been their faith, and how inconsistent they have been in their walk. Sunday morning, they kneel at the altar, they sense Jesus holding them close, the voice of their shepherd comforts them, and not too far away their granddaughter says to herself, "I want to be strong in my faith like Grandma and Grandpa someday."

Secondly, we should do this often because Christ promises to bestow upon us His blessings. Chiefly, there is the forgiveness of sins, as indicated by the words of Jesus, *Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.* Secondly, there is rest for souls that are weary, as in *Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.* Third, there is strength for a holier life, as in **If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature.** Fourth, there is the blessing of bearing testimony that we are of one faith, as in I Corinthians 10, **“Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”**

The kingdom of God is like a middle-aged woman who is feeling guilty because she really hasn't been using her time well. She's tired from staying at home and worrying about what's going on in this world these days. She's weak from trying to make it through hard times on her own. She's lonely and she misses her husband and her parents who have gone on before her into heaven. She kneels at the altar, she eats and she drinks, and in that moment, her guilt gives way to a clean conscience, her tiredness gives way to new energy, her frail spirit stands up strong, and her loneliness is swallowed up by a sense of belonging.

Third, we should do this often because we need the forgiveness of sins and the strength to resist the devil, the world, and our flesh.

The kingdom of God is like a church that is scattered on Maundy Thursday, 2020. So much they don't know tonight. So much that is uncertain. But this they have in common; they know they are the loved and the precious and the redeemed and the forgiven and the enlightened and the sanctified people of God. They know that the Lord's Supper is essential to their spiritual health, they know their God can be trusted, and they know that as often as they eat and drink with repentant and believing hearts, they are proclaiming the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ until He comes back again.