

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost - Year C

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Third Sunday of Preaching Series on Worship

Genesis 18:1-10a

Psalm 15

Colossians 1:15-28

Luke 10:38-42

07/21/2019

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke:

38Now as [Jesus and his disciples] went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 40But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." 41But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

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

Eucharist

Good morning! Today we continue this month's sermon series on worship, and this week we turn our focus to Holy Communion. Now there once was a priest preparing the youth of the congregation for their first communion. The priest was experienced, and thought that they had heard all the questions that one could expect. So the priest went through all the usual stuff, giving the lesson by memory. When they finished the priest asked if anyone had any questions, and one of the kids raised their hands. "So the wine becomes the blood of Christ?" "Yes," the priest answered. "And the bread is the body of Christ?" Again, the priest answered "yes." "So he rose from the dead because of the yeast?" "No!" The priest answered. "None of this makes any sense," the child commented. During a long pause another confirmand raised their hand. "How much communion do we need to eat before we've consumed one whole Jesus?" The priest just stood there with their mouth held open in confusion.

Oh communion, how it can confuse us so. I think it would be helpful to understand where the Lutheran Church stands in regards to its theology of communion, and where we stand relative to other denominations. I want you to imagine a graph with one long line from end to end. On one corner are the words "actual body and blood of Jesus Christ" and on the other are "merely an act of remembrance." On the side of "actual body and blood" are Christians like the Catholic and Orthodox churches. Opposite these groups are Protestants like non-denominational Christians and the Baptists. If you put an X directly in the middle and then move a little bit towards the

“actual body and blood” you will find the Lutherans and Episcopalians. Moving from the middle towards “an act of remembrance” you will find other denominations like the Methodists and Presbyterians. The Lutheran tagline for describing our theology of communion is “bread and wine with God’s word in, under, and around it.” Martin Luther argued so strongly for communion being something more than merely an act of remembrance that when he met with Ulrich Zwingli, the father of the Reformed church, the meeting went surprisingly well... until they got to the topic of communion. Zwingli argued strongly that it was just in remembrance, and Luther eventually stormed out saying something like “I would rather drink real blood with the papists than mere wine with Zwingli!”

Before we continue, let’s get a few words straight. When you hear Communion, Holy Communion, the Lord’s Supper, the Eucharist, the Holy Eucharist, the Sacrament, the Holy Sacrament, and the Mass, those are all words for the same thing: the act of gathering together with a community around bread and wine who then pray and partake of bread and wine in remembrance of Jesus’ final meal with his disciples. In the Lutheran Church one will usually hear it referred to most often as “Communion” or “Holy Communion.” The word takes its form from the Latin word *communio* that means “fellowship, mutual participation, a sharing.”¹ The word Eucharist is derived from the Greek word *eucariste* for thanksgiving.² The term Lord’s Supper we got from

¹ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/communion>

² Schmit, Clayton. Spring, 2013. *Introduction to Christian Worship*, Course Reader. Glossary.

the Apostle Paul. He used it when talking about communion in his first letter to the church in Corinth.³

In fact, let's turn to that letter to see what Paul said. In I Corinthians 11:23-26 we hear the following from Paul: *"23For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, 24and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."* (NRSV)

What we have here is older than the Gospels. And like the Christ hymn in Philippians that we discussed last week it's something that Paul didn't create. It's clear that this is a tradition already well established by the time Paul writes this letter sometime in the mid 50's.⁴ As my pastor growing up said "we do it because Jesus told us to!" And we've been doing it for a very long time.

In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, a foundational Lutheran Confessional document, we read the words *"At the outset it is again necessary, by way of preface, to point out that we do not abolish the Mass but religiously retain and defend it. Among us the Mass is celebrated every Lord's day and on other festivals..."*⁵ That's right, we

³Schmit, Clayton. Spring, 2013. *Introduction to Christian Worship*, Course Reader. Glossary.

⁴ <https://www.enterthebible.org/newtestament.aspx?rid=7>

⁵ AP, 23.1 p. 258. Kolb, Robert, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand. *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.

used to celebrate communion every Sunday and other festival days. A lot of you probably remember the days when communion was only celebrated 4 times a year, or maybe once a month. When I arrived at St. Paul's we were only communing every other Sunday. Have you ever wondered where that pattern came from? Well, you're going to learn today!

When Lutheranism made its way to the Americas oh so many years ago we had a problem... we didn't have enough pastors to cover all the churches. AND we certainly didn't have enough pastors from the right denomination. So a lot of pastors traveled from place to place. The itinerant preacher would show up in a town, gather any who wished to commune, and celebrate the sacrament, then moving on his way to the next town. Bishop Matthew Riegel, the bishop of the West Virginia Western-Maryland synod, once told me a story of a pastor who got lost one night while traveling, finding his way to a small town in the dark who upon discovering that he was a pastor broke down into tears and begged for the Sacrament of Communion. It had been over five years since they had last communed. Over time the habit of communing only a handful of times started to feel normal, and crept its way into Lutheran worship patterns and pastors have been trying to fix it since!

In the early days of Christianity, communion looked much different. Worship took place in other believers' homes. Communion would have taken the form of an actual meal with followers laying around a table eating and talking. As the church became more organized priests would preside over the meal. In fact, the Rev. Judy Cobb has explained why she communes before the congregation with this story. Supposedly, the early church had to deal with the dangers of poisoning during times of persecution.

So the priest would drink the wine and eat the bread first so that they would die instead of someone else. Luther was the first to speak the words of the mass in German so that everyone could understand what was happening. He also made sure that everyone who communed got both bread and wine. It was the habit of the Catholic church at the time to withhold part of the sacrament.

Fast forward to the present day and you will see all sorts of different practices. Mark Wheman used to worship at a congregation that used champagne instead of red wine, because “the Eucharist was a festive occasion and it deserved a festive wine.” Some places use unleavened bread like Jesus would have eaten on the Passover. Others use risen bread because Jesus Christ has now risen from the dead. Some congregations use the cardboard wafers, some use store bought bread, and others bake their own. The practices are as varied as the number of congregations that participate. But one thing remains the same: God comes to us in bread and wine, offering us forgiveness of sins and giving us a foretaste of that heavenly banquet that is to come. Amen.