

Sermon on 1 Corinthians 11:23-32, The Sacrament of the Altar  
Midweek Lenten Worship, Wednesday, March 24, 2010  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson (aka "Martin Luther")

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace..

This evening I am blessed to preach one more time for this Lenten season at Lutheran Church of the Redeemer. It has been my pleasure to proclaim God's Word of grace as we have reviewed the teachings of my *Small Catechism* these past forty days. For Lent is truly a time to return to the basic teachings of the Christian faith: the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Confession and Absolution, the sacrament of Holy Baptism and tonight, the Sacrament of the Altar – also known as Holy Communion, or the Lord's Supper.

People outside the Church may wonder why Christians gather for this sacred meal, which is unlike any other. Most Christians will reply that it is a sign of faith, and that in this world of many challenges to faith our spiritual lives need regular nourishment. This is what our Lord's Supper provides. But many in the Church only have a faint idea of what holy communion is all about, or receive it only out of habit, or duty. To me, they are missing out on the true gift of grace that our Lord's Supper is! So it is our duty as Christian preachers and teachers to share its deeper meaning with them. So, why do Christians commune, and how often we should come to our Lord's table?

In my day all Christians were required to commune between Easter and the 10 days after Pentecost. But with the abolishment of the pope's authority, and the breaking up of the Church in Europe, many people no longer wanted to receive the sacrament. Some treated it with contempt - perhaps in reaction to centuries of ecclesiastical control. Still, we should not compel anyone to believe or to receive the Sacrament, nor fix any law or time or place for it. Instead, we should preach in such a way that the people make themselves come without our law and just plain compel us pastors to minister the Sacrament to them! This can be done by telling them: "You have to worry that whoever does not desire or receive the Sacrament despises the Sacrament and is no Christian, just as anyone who does not listen to or believe the gospel is no Christian." For Christ did not say, "Omit this," or "Despise this," but instead, "Do this, as often as you drink it." He really wants it to be done and not completely omitted or despised. "Do this," he says.

Those who do not hold the Sacrament in high esteem indicate that they have no sin, no flesh, no devil, no world, no death, no dangers, no hell. That is, they believe they have none of these things, although they are up to their ears in them and belong to the devil twice over! On the other hand, they indicate that they need no grace, no life, no paradise, no heaven, no Christ, no God, nor any other good

thing. For if they believed that they possessed so much evil and needed so much good, they would not neglect the Sacrament, in which help against such evil is provided and in which so much good is given. It would not be necessary to compel them with any law to receive the Sacrament. Instead, they would come on their own, rushing and running to it; they would compel themselves to come and would insist that you and I give them the Sacrament!

For these reasons the Church doesn't need to make any law concerning this, as it did once before. We only need to emphasize clearly the benefit and the harm, the need and the blessing, the danger and the salvation regarding this sacrament. Then people will doubtless come on their own without compulsion. They will come and receive it gladly, when we teach the truth about this gift of grace, that it is an invitation from our Lord to eat at his own table, together with all our brothers and sister, to receive forgiveness of sins, life and salvation!

Sometimes people ask me why one simple sacrament can have four different names! Well, let me tell you. The different names remind us of the four different characteristics of this sacrament. For example, when we call it the "Sacrament of the Altar" we emphasize the importance of Christ's sacrifice for our sins, just as in ancient days birds and animals were sacrificed to God on an altar as an offering for human sin. When we call it "Holy Communion" we accent the intimate bond that God has created between those who come to this meal and its host, our Lord Jesus – and the communion we have together as the Church. When we call it the "Holy Eucharist", a Greek term which means "thanksgiving", it reminds us that this is a feast of joy for the forgiveness of sins and salvation that God has promised us all. Finally, when we call it the "Lord's Supper" we are reminded that this is a meal to which we are all invited, and our host is our Lord Jesus Christ himself! This name is the one most often used in the New Testament. It emphasizes that this is our *Lord's* supper, not ours, eaten in faith in God's promise to save us.

*So what is the Sacrament of the Altar?* It is the true body and blood of Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ himself for us Christians to eat and drink.

*Where is this written?* The holy evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and St. Paul write this: *In the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread, and gave thanks; broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: Take and eat, this is my body, given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.*

*Again, after supper, he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it for all to drink, saying: This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this for the remembrance of me.*

*What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?* The words "given for you" and "shed for you...for the forgiveness of sin" show us that forgiveness of sin, life,

and salvation are given to us in the sacrament through these words, because where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

*How can bodily eating and drinking do such a great thing?* Eating and drinking certainly do not do it, but rather the words that are recorded: “given for you” and “shed for you...for the forgiveness of sin.” These words, when accompanied by the physical eating and drinking, are the essential thing in the sacrament, and whoever believes in these very words has what they declare and state, namely, “forgiveness of sin.”

*Who then, receives this sacrament worthily?* Fasting and bodily preparation are in fact a fine external discipline, but a person who has faith in these words, “given for you” and “shed for you...for the forgiveness of sin,” is really worthy and well prepared. However, a person who does not believe these words or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared, because the words “for you” require truly believing hearts.

So the apostle Paul deals with this matter of worthiness to receive the Sacrament in his first letter to the church in Corinth, the passage which was read tonight. His purpose for writing was first and foremost the divisions around the sacrament that he had observed in the Corinthian church. He had heard that there were factions among them, so some would eat the supper, some would go hungry, and some would become drunk! This showed contempt for the Church and for those who had nothing! So Paul repeated the words that Jesus himself had said to his disciples on the night in which he was betrayed, on that night of the Last Supper, when he first instituted the sacrament of the altar.

Brothers and sisters, if this is the Lord’s Supper, and Jesus is the host, we are accountable to him if we eat the bread or drink the cup in an unworthy manner. So everyone in the church should examine themselves first, before eating and drinking! For without such discernment, we eat and drink judgment against ourselves. Paul wrote this as a warning to the church, and to us today, so that we would not be judged unworthy or disciplined by the Lord, or condemned along with the world. Instead, by examining ourselves, and confessing our sins, we can come to the table absolved of sin, worthy to receive the body and blood of Christ our Lord, and thus receive the promise of salvation!

Dear friends, I am delighted that you so frequently celebrate our Lord’s Supper these days in your church, sharing the Holy Eucharist every Sunday at Redeemer. I am also delighted that you welcome all the baptized to our Lord’s Table, asking only that they be baptized and believe in Jesus Christ as Savior. You also welcome children to the table, which I also heartily approve, for didn’t our Lord Jesus himself say, “Suffer the little children to come to me, for to such as these the kingdom of God belongs?” So you welcome everyone, regardless of age, race, color, family, wealth or status to worship here and come to the table. This is

indeed the proof that it is not your table but the Lord's, for Jesus Christ is the host, and we are all the welcome guests. For we are all poor beggars, begging for bread, and our Lord has provided such a rich and welcome banquet for us all! For this, we are forever thankful, and so we close with this simple prayer:

Let us pray: We do not presume to come to your table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy to gather up the crumbs under your table. But you are the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy. Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ, and so to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him and he in us. Amen.