

“Here I Am...For you” | Matthew 28
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In the Lord's Supper Jesus comes to us saying, Here I Am...For You. We receive the sacrament in faith, being strengthened in our faith and hope toward God and love toward one another.

Some of my favorite memories are of sitting around a table. Sitting around a table, of course, filled with food and surrounded by family and friends. I remember gathering around the table at my grandparents house for Christmas or Easter dinner, the table filled with my grandma's incredible cooking and surrounded by parents, sister, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Holidays were always a total family affair.

I remember my second date with Jen, sitting around a table at what would become one of our favorite St. Louis restaurants, Katie's Pizza. In fact, that moment, that meal, was so influential that Katie's is where we had our wedding reception almost five years ago. Another wonderful memory of sitting around tables, with the most amazing Pizza, with our family and friends.

I remember Jen and I, again, sitting around a table in Venice with an incredible view of St. Mark's Cathedral on the other side of the water, eating the most amazing food and drinking some of the best wine I've tasted. It was such a great meal we almost missed the last Water Taxi back across the lagoon!

I remember my friend James and my trip to Italy some years before Jen and I went. We were on a train to Assisi, the famous home of St. Francis, when we happened to meet an American monk who was living in Assisi. Later that night the three of us sat together around a table for hours at a small restaurant that I could never find again if you paid me a million dollars and ate an incredible meal of pasta and wild boar and Umbrian wine and had a terrific conversation about food, his life in Italy, and our common Christian faith.

Some of my fondest memories in life are memories of a table. A table filled with food and surrounded by people. I could go on and on about memories I have around a table, in college, with friends, with Jen, with Family.

And I bet you could too. With the person next to you, take 2 minutes to share one of your greatest memories around a meal.

There's something about a meal and conversation with people that ignites these memories. We might have lots of memories stored up of things we've *done* in life, but I bet we have just as many of these times when we're not really *doing* anything except *being*. Being with the people that we love and enjoy being with.

Because food plays such an important role in our lives, it's really no surprise that food plays a central role in the Bible as well. In the Garden of Eden, before the fall into sin,

God creates this idyllic home for his human creatures and the Bible makes a point to tell us that, there in the garden, God had given them every living plant and their fruit to eat.

As the Hebrew people are about to leave Egypt, they are commanded by God to eat the Passover meal of unleavened bread, and roasted lamb. This meal would connect generations of Israelites to this monumental event in their history and their relationship with YAHWEH. When Elijah was on the run from the evil king Ahab, he entered into the house of a poor widow and her son. They had just enough flour and oil to make a little more bread. After that, they were done. But through the power of God, the flour in the jar and the oil in the jug miraculously continued to provide for the widow, her son, *and* Elijah for many days!

When the prophet Isaiah looked forward to the time when God would once again make his creation perfect, redeeming and restoring it from sin, Isaiah described it in terms of a banquet feast. The best food, the choicest wine for all to enjoy. Indeed, the book of Revelation describes the eschaton in the same ways.

Of course, Jesus himself knew the important role that food plays in the lives of humans. His first miracle in Cana was to turn that water into wine. He miraculously fed those who had followed him out into the middle of nowhere, knowing that feeding their bellies and feeding their souls were inextricably linked. Jesus was a regular at dinner parties, making his own memories, taking no mind of the company he kept.

And, of course, as Jesus is celebrating that Passover meal with his disciples, the very night when he is betrayed into the hands of those who would crucify him, on this night Jesus institutes what we call Holy Communion, or the Lord's Supper, the Sacrament of the Altar, or the Eucharist. There are many names for it but they all refer to this one thing: on this night Jesus gathers his disciples together around the table where the Passover meal has been prepared. Jesus then takes the core elements of the meal, the bread and the wine, and he instills them with new meaning for a new covenant that will be sealed, not in the blood of a lamb, but in *Jesus'* blood. Indeed, Jesus instills these elements not only with new meaning, but he instills them with his very self!

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Food is such a central aspect of our human experiences, it's a central part of Scripture, and it's a central part of our practice as Christians "Living by Faith". God takes simple, ordinary food, and places it front and center in the worshipping life of the Christian community in order to feed and nourish us, His people.

But as we wind down this sermon series called "Living by Faith" in which we've been exploring the means of grace, we will see that in this meal of bread and wine is so much more than just simple bread and a little bit of wine. As we've been in this series "Living by Faith" and we've been looking at what we call "The Means of Grace" we have seen over and over again how God takes the most ordinary things of life and transforms them into something that is far more incredible. He takes water, he takes Words and He makes them life giving.

That's what the Means of Grace are: those ways in which God distributes his grace to each and every one of us, right here in this place. See, 2,000 years ago Jesus won that grace for us. 2,000 years ago Jesus dies a death that was meant for you and me. 2,000 years ago Jesus takes all of our sin upon himself and it is crucified along with Him. All of our sin. And that sin gets buried in the grave on Good Friday but on Easter Sunday, when Jesus gets up out of the grave? Well, that sin stays dead. Jesus is alive but that sin is gone.

That's what Jesus did for us 2,000 years ago.

But God's means of grace...it's all about making that grace real and tangible for us in the here and now. It's all about God making sure that you and I *know*, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that He is our God and we are his beloved, forgiven children. It's what I like to call the "for you-ness" of the Gospel. It's not an abstract idea or a philosophy of life. It's God's love and grace and mercy delivered right to your doorstep. So what are these means of grace?

Well, first we talked about baptism. In our baptism God calls us to be his very own children, calling us by name...Nick, Jen, Bart, Valora, whoever else is sitting there...I baptized *you* in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God joins his Word, his very promise of salvation, to the ordinary waters of baptism and declares that we are his children. That Jesus-won grace is applied to each and every one of us in that moment.

Then we talked about Confession and Absolution. Through the words spoken by the pastor here in worship, or through the words of forgiveness spoken by a friend, a spouse, a sibling, God again assures us of what Jesus accomplished on the cross. You are forgiven. Indeed, whenever and wherever the Gospel is preached, that is a means of grace.

Water splashed on the head...words spoken. It's all ordinary stuff but when God attaches His Word to it, they become a means of grace. God delivering the goods to you and me.

So it is with the bread and wine of Holy Communion. As we said earlier, in Communion when we encounter these simple elements, we're not just encountering bread and wine. We are encountering a means of grace. But what makes it a means of grace? Well, in our Gospel text this morning from Matthew we hear Jesus' very own words as he institutes the Lord's Supper for his disciples and for us. And we hear in this text that this bread that we eat and this wine that we drink is more than meets the eye. This is what Jesus says to us:

[Re-read Gospel text]

Take and eat, this is my body. Take and drink, this is by blood. It doesn't represent my body. It doesn't represent my blood. But in this Sacrament I am truly present. Truly

present in a manner different than Christ is present with us always. How do we know that? Because that's what Jesus tells us. This is my body. This is my blood. So what makes it a means of grace? Jesus' very own words and promise. This is for you...for the forgiveness of sins.

Around the time that Luther was writing his catechisms and preaching in Germany, there were some who sought to teach that the Lord's Supper was simply a remembrance of Jesus' death and resurrection. That Christ wasn't actually, truly present in the meal. It didn't make sense. How could the infinite Christ be present in this finite piece of bread? And how can he be present in all the celebrations of the Lord's Supper around the world?

And then there were others who sought to say that, although it appeared to still be bread and wine, it had actually changed in its substance to the body and blood of Christ. What's more, they also advocated that the sacrament was a re-sacrifice of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins.

Neither of these positions was tenible for Luther because the first failed to take the words of Jesus seriously. The second sought to go beyond what Jesus had said and try to explain the mystery of the Sacrament.

So what Luther taught and what the Lutheran church continues to teach is simply this: We take Jesus at his word. Jesus says, this is my body. This is my blood. In effect, Jesus says, "Here I am". In a mysterious way that we don't try to explain, Jesus says I am truly present in this meal. And where Christ is present, we know for sure that we have the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Jesus says here am I...and here I am for you. Jesus comes to us in, with, and under the bread and the wine for our benefit. For our forgiveness of sins.

So we come and we receive this meal no matter what's happening outside of these walls. Perhaps we're struggling with a particular sin. No matter how hard we try to shake it, it just keeps coming after us. It might be an addiction, it might be a sexual sin, it might be something else.

Or, perhaps we feel alone. Perhaps we feel like we have no one we can count on besides ourselves. Perhaps we feel the overwhelm of life and struggle to move forward. Then we come to the Supper. We come and hear those words...take and eat this is my body given **for you**. This is my blood shed **for you**. Here I am, Jesus says to us, in these words. Here I am...for you. To forgive you...to love you...to show you that you are not alone. You're not alone as you struggle with your sins. You are not alone as you struggle through life. You are not alone as you try and figure out all of life's tough questions. Here I am...for you.

That, indeed, is a means of grace. We don't try to explain away Jesus' words. We don't try to rationalize Jesus' words. We simply take them at face value. Because, as one pastor likes to say, "When Jesus throws a party, he shows up!". And indeed, in the

Sacrament of Holy Communion - Jesus shows up. He shows up for you and for me. For the forgiveness of all our sins. Here I am, He says. For you.

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We have so many memories sitting around a table, eating, talking, laughing. So much community is built as we sit around a table. But there is no more important table than Christ's table - the table that we gather around this morning. He invites us to come to his table and receive the gifts he has to offer. What is that gift? His very self. His body and his blood which was given to you on Calvary's cross is now received by faith today. And as we receive Christ's true body and blood with the bread and the wine, we receive even more. God's grace...God's mercy...God's forgiveness...God's very presence with His people.

Amen.