

Living by Faith: Holy Communion | 1 Corinthians
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When coming to the Lord's Supper the Gospel proclaims that the unworthy are worthy to come to the table! May we receive Christ's body and blood in order to strengthen our faith which is often weak and frail.

Develop the Dilemma:

She was ninety years old if she was a day, sitting in a wheelchair near the elevator of the Lutheran nursing home in Minneapolis. As a seminarian, I was assigned to field education at the home, and that particular Sunday was helping Chaplain Lloyd Mart distribute the Lord's Supper. After communing those healthy enough to gather in the seventh-floor chapel, we then took the elements - I with the bread; Chaplain Mart with the wine - down the elevator to each floor and communed those who were too frail to leave the floor but who had gathered under the speaker near the elevator to hear the service. As I approached with the bread, she clasped her hand to her mouth and croaked, "Not worthy! I am not worthy!" I stopped head. I'd never heard of such a thing. The thought crossed my mind that if she wasn't worthy, we were all in a lot of trouble.¹

Ask the Focusing Question

This morning is our sixth and final sermon in this series, "Living by Faith". And it's also, incidentally, the last of what has been a series of 17 sermons as we have made our way through the Six Chief Parts of Luther's Small Catechism the past 2 ½ years or so. The 10 Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, The Sacrament of Baptism, Confession, and now Holy Communion.

We've been really hanging out these last six weeks on the concept of the Means of Grace. By now, you know what I mean when I say Means of Grace. Those ways in which God delivers to us here and now the grace and forgiveness of Jesus. Christ has instituted these very sensory means by which he delivers his grace to us. They are tangible, they are audible, they are tastable. Water, words, bread and wine. In these ways God connects his word to these elements all so that we might receive this overabundance of his grace each week.

In particular, as we conclude this series, we focus once again on Holy Communion. Last week saw that as Lutherans we believe and teach in the real presence of Christ in, with, and under the bread and the wine. In Jesus' own words resides a promise to be present as Jesus says to us, "This is my body....this is my blood". In essence, Jesus says to us each and every time we receive the sacrament, "Here I am...for you".

But the story I read just a moment ago poses an interesting question and, frankly, and important question for us as we prepare ourselves each week to receive the body and

¹ Wengert, Timothy J. 2006. *A formula for parish practice: using the Formula of Concord in congregations*. Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 125.

blood of Jesus in Holy Communion. If Jesus is really present in the Sacrament, what on earth makes *you and me* worthy to receive the Lord's Supper? As the author said, if this little old lady in the nursing home isn't worthy, what chance do I have?

Because, listen, everytime we celebrate Communion here at St. Mark we first take time to examine ourselves as Paul admonishes us to do in our Epistle lesson from 1 Corinthians. We have 5 questions that we ask and we'll ask again this morning as we celebrate communion together. So we ask these five questions and, evidently, we are counted worthy to participate in the supper. As we conclude this series, "Living by Faith", we want to ask this question: "What makes you and I worthy to receive the Lord's Supper?"

I suppose we could come up with a variety of answers but we'll take a look at just a few this morning. What makes you and I worthy to receive the Lord's Supper? Could it be our...

Good and pious deeds?

I wonder, is it our piety that makes us worthy to come and receive the sacrament? Certainly, if we have been to worship a million times over the past forty years and have memorized the liturgy we ought to be counted worthy of receiving Christ's body and blood? Or perhaps if we've volunteered enough times for enough events? Definitely if we got up early enough to attend Bible study we should be counted worthy?

Or, I wonder, if our worthiness is found in our pious preparation for Holy Communion. Some people fast before they receive the sacrament, making it the first thing they eat or drink on a Sunday morning. Now, if anything ought to make one worthy of coming to the Lord's table, certainly it's denying one's self of his or her morning coffee, right? Or maybe it goes the other way...if anything makes me worthy of receiving communion it's putting up with those who have denied themselves of their morning coffee. Our fasting, our praying as we prepare for Holy Communion - are these the things that make us worthy to receive?

Luther does say in his catechism that fasting and prayer are, indeed, fine ways to prepare to receive Christ's body and blood in Holy Communion. But they are not the point. They do not make us worthy to receive Holy Communion and all its benefits for us. And neither do all our good deeds and volunteer hours combined.

Indeed, here at St. Mark as we prepare ourselves for holy communion, we use that list of five questions and the very first question is, "Do I believe I am a sinful human being?" And if we're being honest, we must answer yes. And if we answer yes, then our confession of sins eliminates any possibility that it's our good and pious deeds that make us worthy. They cannot and do not make us worthy recipients of Holy Communion.

So if not our outward works and pious Christian lifestyle, what else? How about our...

Good intentions to "do better"?

Does our heartfelt desire to live our lives more in accord with the will of God, does that make us worthy, then, to come to the Lord's supper? We do, when we examine ourselves as we prepare for communion, express our desire to live a godly life. That's part of our preparation and that's a good thing. We express our desire to grow in our love for God and our love for neighbor. We want to repent of our sins, to turn away from them, and begin to turn toward God. But is it our good intentions that make us worthy to approach the table and receive Christ's body and blood?

While it's a good thing to intend to do better, here's the rub: How do we know if we're sincere enough? How could we ever know if our intentions are true? More than that, what if we don't live up to our intentions? What then? We're back to where we started. Neither our actions nor our *intended* actions can make us worthy.

Strong faith?

So it's not our actions and our outward preparation. If it's not even the good intentions we express to live a more godly life, what in fact makes us worthy?

What about a strong, rock-solid faith? Is it our strong, unwavering faith that allows us to come and receive Christ's body and blood? Now to be sure, we do receive the gifts of God by faith. We examine ourselves and silently confess that we believe in faith that Christ died for the forgiveness of our sins and that Christ is truly received in, with, and under the bread and the wine in Holy Communion. All of these things we must take on faith - we must trust in Christ for all of this.

But if the only gauge for being worthy to come and receive Christ's body and blood is our strong faith, how do we know if our faith is, indeed, strong enough? What constitutes a strong faith? Must we have zero doubts to be admitted to the Lord's Table? Must we always be in some hyper-spiritual state "letting go and letting God"? Lord, I hope not.

I hope not. Because don't we all, when we really get right down to it, have a pretty weak and frail faith? If we really examine ourselves, if we really check in with ourselves and with our faith, are any of us doubt free? Have any of us really stopped idolizing ourselves and trusting in our own wisdom, our own power, our own strength to get us through life? Are any of us, when we hear the words of Jesus "This is my body, this is my blood", doubt free. Do any of us hear those words and say, "Oh yeah, that makes sense. I'm OK with that"?

I don't think so. If you're human. If you're actually engaging with it...if you're really thinking about it...the only thing I don't doubt is that we all have our doubts. We all have our doubts and when we get right down to it, our faith is weak and frail.

Jesus Makes Us Worthy

What makes us worthy? Because it seems, and I don't think I'm just making it up here, that we're all actually pretty unworthy. We're all a bunch of sinners. We're all a bunch of people who have *great* intentions that just don't ever seem to work out too well. We're

all a bunch of people who doubt. Who trust in ourselves more than we trust in Christ. Who hear his words and doubt.

We're all pretty unworthy.

And that's the point. Your unworthiness is the point. If you think you're worthy...if you think you belong up here receiving the body and blood of Jesus you couldn't be more wrong. If you think that by your deeds, by your good intentions, or by your super-strong faith you have made yourself worthy, then you are dead wrong. Those who think they are worthy...well, they're unworthy.

But those who see their unworthiness in all it's wretchedness. Those who see their sin and desire to be rid of it, those who come to communion as a beggar...desiring Jesus to change them...desiring Jesus strengthen their faith...well, these are the ones who are worthy.

For what does Jesus himself say?

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. (Mt. 11:28)

Those who are well have no need to a physician, but those who are sick (Mt. 9:12)

What does Paul say?

"God's power in made mighty in the weak" (2 Cor. 12:9)

Welcome those who are weak in faith...for God has welcomed them" (Romans 14:1-2)

Indeed, it is our utter unworthiness that makes us worthy to receive Communion. For this is exactly the type of person Jesus came to save. This is exactly the type of person Jesus came to draw to himself. He didn't choose us because we're rock stars. He choose us because we need him. We need his grace...we need his mercy...we need his power and his strength.

Conclusion

That Sunday in the Lutheran nursing home there in Minneapolis, a seminarian saw the Gospel at play first-hand. With a woman, mouth covered, crying "I'm not worthy!" in front of him, Wengert concludes the story like this:

Chaplain Mart seemed to know just what to do. He crossed in front of me, laid his hand on her head, and pronounced the absolution: 'In Christ, I pronounce to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins.' Slowly her hand dropped, and I was able to commune her.²

² Ibid, 125.

What makes us worthy to receive? Jesus makes us worthy. His overabundance of grace given to us in baptism, confession and absolution, and in Holy Communion. We come to worship to receive. And receive we do. He offers his grace to us not because we've been good enough, not because we're going to try harder next time, and not because our faith is rock-solid each and every day. He offers his grace to us because we need it. And he invites us to come, to take and to eat, to take and to drink his true body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins.

Jesus invites us into his true presence. And we can...we do because *He* makes us worthy. Amen.