

## **“Things Get Real”**

Liturgical Date: Maundy Thursday (A)

Primary Text: 1 Corinthians 11:23-32; St. Matthew 26:17-30

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary texts for tonight, Maundy Thursday, are the Epistle Lesson from 1 Corinthians 11 and Gospel Lesson from St. Matthew 26. It will also draw on Luther’s explanation of the Sacrament of the Altar in the Small Catechism. I am also thankful for guidance from a document that has been released from our Synodical Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) and from a short lesson via Rev. Bryan Wolfmueller, an LCMS pastor in Austin, Texas. The title of the sermon is “Things Get Real”.

When something happens a saying people will use today is “It just got real.” Usually this connected with a specific event, which brings them to a point of realization that something is serious or very important. Obviously, our nation has been impacted greatly by the Coronavirus and the response to it. It seemed somewhat distant to us at first, an unusual virus in China that seemed to be causing problems. But it was on the other side of the world. Then it came to other countries. But even when it arrived here, it was on the West Coast so many people in our parts were not too concerned about it. But then it got real. When did it happen for you? Was it when the schools closed? Could it have been when major sports and events began shutting down? Was it when the President and other leaders started suggesting and requiring restrictions that we are not accustomed too? Perhaps it was when someone you know, a friend or family member, contracted this virus.

Maybe it was when you received an email from the church that we would not be meeting together in our regular manner.

On what we today call Maundy Thursday, things were “getting real” for the Disciples. They had been with Jesus for over three years and He had actually told them that He would have to suffer and die. But they did not completely understand this and it didn’t always seem imminent. But that week had been pretty eventful: a triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the cleansing of the temple, Jesus sparring verbally with His opponents. And now, now, they have come to the Thursday night that we heard about in our Gospel Lesson from St. Matthew 26 and the other Gospels, where they will observe that Holy Feast commanded by God: the Passover. It was quite different than other Passover meals that they had celebrated with their rabbi. Jesus, their master washed their feet instead of servants. He gave them a time of extended teaching. Jesus dropped a “bombshell” that one of them would betray Him. Then there was that late night prayer vigil in the Garden of Gethsemane, followed by an arrest of Jesus by Roman soldiers. The Disciples scattered in fear. Things had got real.

And of course, there is one other key aspect of that Passover meal that I did not mention. At this “Last Supper”, Jesus institutes the Lord’s Supper, which will effectively replace Passover. He blessing bread and wine and then tells them to eat and drink, that this “*is my body*” and “*this is my blood*”. And verse 28 attaches a beautiful promise to this meal, “*For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.*” And Sts. Luke and Paul record that this is to be something that Christians will regularly observe in words that are inscribed on our Altar

*“Do this in Remembrance of Me”*. This was a very special gift that Jesus gave to His Disciples that Thursday evening, and to the whole Church.

I have not found a better brief definition of the Lord’s Supper than the one that I read to you earlier from Luther’s Small Catechism, *“It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, for us Christians to eat and to drink, instituted by Christ Himself.”* As I just stated a key aspect of the Lord’s Supper, observing Communion, is that we do it in remembrance of Him. But unfortunately many Christians stop there and limit it to a “memorial” that we do for God because He told us to. They see the elements of bread and wine as only symbolic.

As Lutherans, we know that there is more—because the Bible tells us this. In the Sacrament of the Altar God is really present. We not only receive bread and wine, but the very body and blood of Jesus. Jesus makes this clear by His use of the word “is”. This is no mere literary device being employed by Jesus. St. Paul makes that clear in 1 Corinthians 11 repeating that it “is” and furthermore saying in verse 27, *“Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord”* and then in verse 29 speaks of the judgment that comes upon the unworthy recipients because they are *“not discerning the Lord’s body.”* And since we literally receive Jesus, just as He said, and Luther writes in answering what are the benefits of such eating and drinking, *“That is shown by these words, given and shed for you for the remission of sins; namely, that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given through these words.”* Our faith is strengthened as we receive from the Lord. It is not only a symbol, but it gets real: real Jesus, real forgiveness, real faith.

And because we understand these truths, this is one of the main reasons why not meeting together as we normally do is so hard for us Lutherans. Because we are missing that regular reception of the Sacrament. We long to be able to receive this food from God and fellowship with our fellow believers around the altar.

In fact, we must be careful in that our longing for the Sacrament it does not lead to ways that would “cut corners” or celebrate it in any way that is outside of the Lord’s instructions on how to properly do it. We must not do anything that would introduce any doubt to the legitimacy of the Sacrament. Your Synod, pastor, and elders take this very seriously. This is why we have not tried a “distance model” of Communion as some churches are doing (mostly non-Lutheran, but some have) where you have elements at home and the Pastor speaks the Words of Institution over the computer and you receive at home. We have never had the pastor “pre-consecrate” elements for elders to later distribute, during this Coronavirus or any other time. We will not simply distribute the elements without providing a time for Confession and Absolution and hearing of God’s Word.

Why not? Because it is very clear that God sets certain requirements and parameters for the Holy things of God. It is all through the Scripture. Specifically in our Old Testament reading for tonight from Exodus you heard that God was very specific as to what the Jewish people were to do on that first Passover as the angel of death was approaching and the time was approaching to flee Egypt. And Holy Communion is tied to Passover in the sense that it replaces it for the New Testament Church. In our Epistle from 1 Corinthians 11, and you can also read in Chapter 10, that St. Paul give some clear directives as to how Communion should be observed and how it

should not be observed, who should commune at the Lord's Table and who should not.

And of course, we look to how Jesus conducted that meal with His Disciples. In looking at what the Scripture says there are essential things that you must have to truly "do this in remembrance of me". You must have the physical elements: bread and wine. You must have the Word of God, speaking the very words God has given us in regards to the Lord's Supper. Again, as Luther puts so well in the Small Catechism, "*It is not the eating and drinking indeed that does them, but the words here written.*" Pastors do not wear a pointy magician's hat, but a stoll. We do not wave magic wands over elements, but instead bear the Sword of the Spirit, which is God's Word. The Words of institution are not a magic incantation, but a speaking of the very Word of God, which by His power do exactly what God says they will. And finally the Sacrament of the Altar is meal shared together, as we often call it "Communion." It is not only communing with God, but with all of those who join us at the Lord's Table and partake. Communion cannot be a solo event, there must be a community. If you remove any of these: the physical elements, God's Word, or a group to commune with you do have the Lord's Supper.

These are things that must guide us. But pastor, I really miss the Sacrament! As you should, it is a good thing to miss it. The real concern would be if you did not miss it! In the same way I would be concerned if you separated from a loved one for a while and thought it was better without them! But I want to offer some encouragement to you today in pointing out a few things.

You are not alone. There is certainly historical precedent for this throughout history. When the plague was ravaging Europe, there were

extended times when God's people could not gather together (and they didn't have the internet!) and could not receive the Lord's Supper. In our own history as Lutherans in America we have examples too. During the Spanish flu of 1918-1920 many churches went without meeting for an extended period of time. In the Colonial and frontier times in America, our forefathers and mothers often went months without receiving Communion. Why? There were so few pastors and people were so spread out and travel was so slow in those days. There could be long spans of time when there was no pastor in your area to have the Divine Service.

Biblically, the Jewish people in 586 saw Jerusalem fall and the temple destroyed by the Babylonians. The temple system had to stop and many were carried off to exile. How would they still practice their faith without the temple system? Unfortunately, this where the Pharisees came from as many turned to a hyper-legalism. May we not make the same mistake.

I made the comment in a sermon a few weeks ago about a meme I saw which said, "*Lord, to be honest I wasn't planning on giving this much up for Lent!*" While meant to be humorous there is a truth here. Lent got real for many people this year. We are giving up a lot in our lives and in our communal life as a local congregation. And not by choice. But let me ask you this, which fasting is better: the fasting that we decide to do on our own or the fasting that is brought by God? That is a rhetorical question. God is with us through this and you can believe He is still with us. During time of fasting, or exile if you, we must ask ourselves what He is teaching us. Perhaps some of us have taken the holy things of God for granted and treated them as "common." Gathering together and regularly receiving the Sacrament may have become routine. In this we can too easily view it a "right" rather than a blessed gift from God. Have we become lazy in our

spiritual preparations prior to receiving the Lord's body and blood? Have we become lax in our observance and admission to Table in terms of the Lord's commands? Use this time as one of inner reflection, repentance, and prayer. What is God teaching you and me? When we can return to a more "normal" routine, my prayer is that we appreciate the gifts of God all the more.

Please hear this carefully, *you do not cease to become a Christian if you by means beyond your control you cannot receive the Sacrament*. In those historical cases I mentioned above, did God remove them from the "Book of Life"? If you were stranded alone on a deserted island and could not go to church or commune, would you automatically be damned? More realistically, if you lived in an area where there were no Bible-believing churches in which attend and commune would you have no hope for salvation? Of course not. *The sin issue here is when we have ample opportunity to receive the Sacrament and God's gifts and choose not to participate*. Think even of Baptism. We hear about the "thief on the cross" during Holy Week. Jesus said that he would be with him in paradise, even though he was not baptized. Obviously this man had no opportunity to do so as he was dying when he was brought to faith. He had not *refused* Baptism, but did not have the *opportunity*. He had the Word of God before Him in Jesus and was granted faith-and that was enough. In the same manner if you do not have a safe and biblical manner to commune it is not sin that you are not communing-the sin is ignoring God's gift of grace.

Which brings me to the next point. The Sacrament of the Altar is a great gift, we know that. But is it the only means which God confers His grace? No. From the recent CTCR document, *"The forgiveness of sins is not prevented when one cannot commune, for it is delivered by the Gospel as*

*it is read and preached and spoken by the royal priesthood and also in the Sacraments of Baptism and the Holy Supper as well as in the Absolution.”*

You see the common “ingredient” is the Word of God. Without that water is just water, bread is just bread, and wine is just wine. God’s Word makes it really a “Means of Grace.” So we have the Word. When God’s Word is read and heard, whether it be in Church, in your home, or even through electronic means the Holy Spirit is at work bringing forgiveness, life, and salvation. Think of the New Testament times. The Epistles were often written to churches and individuals. They were delivered by letter. Was God’s Word delivered by St. John to the 7 churches of Revelation or through Paul to the Church at Corinth less effective because the Apostles were not physically there? Again, a rhetorical question.

Finally, there is one other major point I want to make today. This is described by Luther in his answers to those third and fourth questions on the Sacrament of the Altar. *“he that believes these words”* and *“but he is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words.”* The Gospel is the gift of faith. Please, please don’t turn the Sacraments-God’s gifts into Law. They are Gospel. They are what God does for us, not what we do for God. For a Sacrament to have any benefit at all, there must be faith. Without faith, receiving the Lord’s body and blood is actually harmful as St. Paul warns in 1 Corinthians 11.

Let me teach you some Latin today, *ex opere operato*, which literally means “from the work performed”. You see this pop up over and over again and condemned in the Lutheran Confessions. From the Augsburg Confession Article XIII The Use of the Sacraments, *“Therefore we must use the Sacraments in such a way that faith which believes the promises offered and set forth through the Sacraments is increased. They (our churches)*



*condemn those who teach that the Sacraments justify simply by the act of doing them.”*

That incorrect view is what the Roman Catholic Church teaches. That is why in Luther's day priests said private masses over and over again for other people (of course you could pay them to do it) because the belief was that every time the mass (communion) was performed grace could be transferred to someone-even if they are not there. That is why even in our current situation you will see some priests communing themselves in their recorded Services and even the Pope trying to have communion in front of an empty St. Peter's square. But without people to commune with, it is not communion. Without faith, there is no benefit to Sacrament. But be assured that even this is not our work. The Holy Spirit creates faith and does it by the Word. As I said earlier, the Sacrament of the Altar, while mysterious in that we cannot logically explain how everything happens, is not a magic incantation. It is the Word of God doing what God promises He will and it is received in faith, not just the act of doing. If that were true we would probably doing some of the questionable ways to distribute Communion, but it is not so we want to follow the Lord's directives as it is His Supper, given for us.

As we conclude, if you are a member of this congregation you should have received an email about an opportunity to receive Communion on Easter Sunday. This has been carefully considered and as the email outlines we are working to maintain numbers within the current limits and guidelines as well as providing the highest standard of sanitation possible. Most importantly, we are endeavoring to practice this Holy meal in accordance with God's Word: the elements will be there, there will be a brief liturgy of the Word, an ordained pastor will be the celebrant, and we will have people

to commune with. Prayerfully consider participating in this, not to check off a box, but to receive God's great and "real" gift that He instituted for His people on that first Maundy Thursday. However, if you believe that this is not something you are prepared to do at this time due to safety concerns there will not be judgment. This is an opportunity, not an obligation. It is Gospel, not Law.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.