

Maundy Thursday
April 13, 2017
Matthew 26:17-29

“At the Crossroads: Forgiveness”

Of all the words that may be found in Luther’s *Small Catechism* (and there are many – Luther liked to talk and write!), I think some of the most beautiful and moving are found in that section on the sixth chief part of Christian doctrine, the Sacrament of the Altar. Under the section entitled, “What is the benefit of this eating and drinking?”, Luther writes the following: “These words, ‘Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins,’ show us that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words. **For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation**” (emphasis added). Beautiful! And spot on as well! It is this thing called forgiveness that we focus on this Maundy Thursday evening. The Lenten season draws to a close, and the Three Days that are the high point of our Christian faith begin: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Vigil and Day, commemorating Jesus’ passing over from death to life. Our Lenten preaching series, “At the Crossroads,” continues in this Holy Week as we focus on forgiveness. May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

Jesus’ words are clear: **“Take, eat; this is my body... Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the new covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins”** (Matthew 26:26, 27b-28). It’s not just a picture or symbol. Jesus doesn’t say, “This bread represents,” or “This wine stands for.” No, Jesus says, “This *is*.” We take Jesus’ words at face value: under earthly forms of bread and wine, the Lord Jesus himself gives his very self – his very body and blood – to you, to me, to all who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Though we do not understand or grasp how this works, we hold fast to Jesus and his Word. We walk by faith. We eat and drink by faith. We stand in a restored and right relationship with God by faith through the forgiveness that Jesus has won for us.

This gift called Holy Communion has many names: the Sacrament of the Altar, the Lord’s Supper, the breaking of the Bread, the Eucharist. Our Lutheran Confessions even refer to this as “the Mass” (Augsburg Confession, XXIV, “The Mass”). Of all the names that there are for this blessed gift from Christ himself, the one I have come to cherish most is “the Lord’s Supper.” I grew up in rural Iowa where it wasn’t breakfast, lunch and dinner, but breakfast, dinner and *supper*. Supper was the evening meal, and that is the context in which Jesus instituted this Sacrament: the Passover meal, which began at sundown (see Old Testament lesson, Exodus 12:1-14). More than this, it is the *Lord’s* Supper – not mine, not yours, but Jesus’ Supper. He himself is the Host and he invites to his table of grace you and me and all who are in need of the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation which only he can give.

There is no burden like the burden of guilt. There is no spiritual pain like that of something we deeply regret; something we wish with all our heart that we could do over again. Those first disciples who were gathered around the Passover table with Jesus would soon know deep and profound guilt. Peter would have to confront his guilt of denying that he ever knew Jesus, and would break down in bitter tears of sorrow. Judas would have to confront his guilt of betraying Jesus for money, and in despair would take his own life. All of the disciples would turn tail and run when Jesus was arrested. No doubt, they all felt tremendous guilt about abandoning Jesus. Guilt can destroy. It can put a shroud of pain and darkness over our lives, but the worst is that we cannot will or wish it away. It hangs over us; haunting us in the night and robbing us of sleep; occupying our thoughts during the day. Left unchecked, it leads to despair, death, and destruction, as it did with Judas.

Are we any different than those first disciples? Haven’t we all in one way or another denied, betrayed, or abandoned Jesus? Confronting our guilt is not easy. It is embarrassing to admit our fault, and it is painful

to face those whom we have wronged or hurt. On that Thursday evening in that upper room, Jesus did not say to his disciples: “Never mind. Your sins aren’t all that bad. Just feel better about yourselves.” The holy meal of Jesus’ true body and blood is not an excuse for sin, but for the confronting and the forgiveness of that sin. Through the body and blood of Jesus received here in this Sacrament, our sins are purged and expunged. In Jesus, we have the assurance that God holds no grudge against those who trust in him, and so we say with the psalmist: **“As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us”** (Psalm 103:12). God not only forgives our sins, but he chooses to forget them as the Lord himself tells us: **“I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more”** (Jeremiah 31:34; Hebrews 8:12, 10:17). This is the forgiveness that God graciously gives through his beloved Son, Jesus, and which is received here in the Lord’s Supper.

This forgiveness from God to us is the vertical dimension of forgiveness, but it must lead to the horizontal dimension of forgiveness. Not only are we to be recipients of God’s grace and forgiveness, we are also to be agents of this same grace and forgiveness in our own lives. God’s forgiveness of us enables us and empowers us to forgive ourselves and others, opening our cold and stony hearts to new life. Forgiveness is counter-intuitive to our human nature. When we are hurt, put down, or injured by someone else, our heart tells us we have a right to strike back and get even, punishing the person who hurt or injured us. And this is the critical crossroads where we have a decision to make: what will we do when this happens? Will we respond in kind, giving as good as we got? In so doing, will we deny Jesus just as surely as Peter did, or betray him just as surely as Judas did? Forgiveness is the canopy under which we live, and move, and have our being as the people of Christ. The late Peter Marshall (1902-1949), a Presbyterian minister who served at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., and was appointed twice as Chaplain to the U.S. Senate, has a marvelous prayer in this regard:

Our Father, I think of all the pain and heartache, the tears and sorrow, the greed and cruelty unloosed around the world. Help me to be an instrument of Thine to alleviate the pain, by this day:

returning good for evil,

returning soft answers for sharp criticisms,

being polite when I receive rudeness,

being understanding when I am confronted by ignorance and stupidity.

So may I, in gentleness and love, check the hasty answer, choke back the unkind retort, and thus short-circuit some of the bitterness and unkindness that has overflowed Thy world. I ask this in the name of Jesus, who alone can give me the grace so to act. Amen.

(The Prayers of Peter Marshall: by Catherine Marshall. Chosen Books, 1954; p. 32)

Here, at the Lord’s table, we can only receive. We have nothing to give or offer. We come with empty hands and open mouths, waiting to be fed. We come with baggage, weighed down by the effects of sin. All pretension and pride must be laid aside as we come to the Lord’s Supper, as we kneel here to receive the Lord Jesus Christ himself as he comes to us. And in receiving the One who loves us and laid down his very life for us, we find forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation – for ourselves and for the world.

Come, for all things are now ready. Amen.