

*Sermon for the 6<sup>th</sup> Wednesday in Lent, 16.iii.2005, 19:30  
Saint Luke Ev. Luth. Church / New Bridgeville, Pennsylvania  
Low Vespers with Holy Communion  
Recitation of the Catechism, the Fifth Chief Part: The Sacrament of Holy Communion  
I Corinthians 11:17-33 ; John 6:35-71*

**J. J. !**

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

In the mid-1540s, toward the end of his tumultuous life, the Reformer, Doctor Sacred Theology, Martin Luther, thought he saw the Reformation and the Church as a community in Christ coming unraveled. Why was he so concerned?

Some of the signs of a spiritual sickness in the Church were evident to Luther more as a parish priest, as a pastor, than as a theologian. Worship attendance and almsgiving at Saint Mary's Church in Wittenberg had plummeted. The people now understood that God's grace was 'free,' and they concluded from this that it was also *cheap*. No longer did they live in fear and trembling before the judgment seat of God, performing as many religious good works as they could to increase their chances of reprieve from hell and a shorter sentence in purgatory. No longer did they come to Mass as the very center of their lives, but they stayed home when they chose,

“living like swine and doing as they please,” so boomed Father Martin, who still heard confessions there on Saturdays, though there were fewer and fewer penitents as well. No longer did they send their sons to the University to prepare for Ordination as pastors, since the Reformation had taught them that there was no particular advantage in ‘having one in the family,’ as people still say. Who needed to have a son or nephew to pray for you after you died, anyway?

Old, sick and somewhat disillusioned Father Martin threatened to go on strike if his Wittenbergers didn’t shape up, gather for worship twice on Sunday and at least once during the week, and make their daughters stop wearing those low-cut frocks that had just come into fashion. He threatened to stop preaching the Gospel and to stop administering the Sacraments, but he never did. The gracious God we have in Jesus Christ, God-with-us, Immanuel, had not abandoned His people, even if they ignored Him, and Martin Luther loved his Christ and his pigheaded, selfish, and foolish people too much not to continue inviting people to a banquet of God’s grace, even if they thought they found a good ring of *Wurst* or a hunk of

cheese more filling than the Bread of Life, and a draught of fresh Saxon beer better able to slake their thirst than the Chalice of the Redeemer.

But at the level of theology and theological debate, Professor Doctor Luther had begun to smell the cold stench of unbelief over a decade before. The Reformation in Germany had started in the universities, among scholars trying to get at the truth about everything and demanding, as Luther had done, that the Church not shoot herself in the foot by preaching God's forgiveness of sins, new life and salvation through the merits of Christ alone, on the one hand, while selling the gullible at least the suggestion that a sinner could pay his way into heaven by making a generous contribution to the building of the Pope's new church in Rome. The Lutheran Reformation insisted on keeping the Church in living dialog with the Holy Scriptures, as the central and final authority in matters of faith and practice, in continuity with the deepest traditions of Christian prayer, with the beauty of traditional Christian worship as it witnessed to the mystery of God, and also in touch with the great theological tradition of the centuries, a tradition which had refuted so

many wild and block-headed heresies in the past. Instead of reinventing the theological wheel—and making the same blunders—the Lutherans emphasized a continuity with the ancient Catholic past while pointing always to the *Evangelium*, to the Gospel, the message of the forgiveness of sins in Christ, as the center and substance of the Christian faith. That is why we are called an *Evangelical* Lutheran Church.

But the Reformation elsewhere was taking a variety of different turns. In Switzerland, for example, it had become a *populist* movement, originating not in universities but in the parishes, a movement addressing itself if not to the masses then to the practical and tidy minds of jurists, city fathers and the new middle class. The Reformed Churches, as they would be called, were revolts against both church and civil authority, against both Pope and Emperor. And they took on that *leveling*, ‘democratic’ attitude that looks with suspicion on anything ‘the people’ of a given time and place have not invented themselves, an arrogance and hostility toward tradition as such, whether in church practice or theological thought. One of their leaders was a parish priest named Huldrych Zwingli. He was a man

of some intelligence and learning and he had nerves of steel. Zwingli had read some of Luther's writings and he thought that he was in agreement with both Luther and the New Testament when he taught that it is not the bread and the wine that are the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion, but that it is instead *the Communicants* who become Christ's real presence, that it is *the Congregation* that becomes the living presence of the Crucified and Risen Lord in this world.

The second part of Zwingli's teaching is a valid and important insight that it is easy to forget, namely, the 'communion,' the fellowship, the bond of love and mercy that continues in us and through us toward one another, toward our neighbor and toward the world after we leave the altar and the worship assembly with God's blessing. But the *first* part of Father Zwingli's teaching made Doctor Luther's blood run cold, as it should ours. For to deny that we encounter the real, living and whole Christ in the elements of His Holy Supper is to take *offense* at Him and His promise and command, just as did the Judæan opponents of Our Lord, just as did many of Jesus' own disciples, just as did *Judas*, according to John, Chapter 6.

When Luther arrived back at Wittenberg after his summit meeting with Zwingli and his companions at Marburg, he wrote in chalk over the door of his study words to the effect that no one should be admitted to theological study or certified for ordination who does not firmly accept Christ's promise of His Body and Blood in the Lord's Supper.

Those are pretty sharp words, and that is a pretty pugnacious, if not obstinate, position, words so sharp and a position so firm that it took over four centuries for Lutherans and the Reformed to recognize in one another's doctrine a confession of faith faithful to the Bible and to Our Lord's promise. It is still a doctrine that *offends* us, if we hear it clearly, and it is a teaching that promises us not only a new beginning but a new *being* in Christ if we believe it firmly, unto our last hour. I believe that what we find *really* offensive about the teaching of the Real Presence is not that we are expected to believe in some sort of magic. Note that the Catechism does not say that the bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper cease to be bread and wine, but the Body and Blood of Christ, the very life of Christ is given *with* those elements of the Passover meal. No, the *really* offensive thing

about the Sacrament of the Lord's Body and Blood is the *diagnosis* of our situation it implies.

In both promising His presence in this Meal and commanding us to eat and drink it, Christ Our Lord makes public what we would rather keep private, shrouded in silence, and that is the fact of our terminal illness, our sickness unto death from our separation from God, our sin. Like at least one other illness I can think of, it is a *systemic* disease, impacting everything we think, say and do with doubt, with selfishness, with fear and with dread of death. And, like that other, physical illness, it is *metastatic*, spread throughout our whole being, body and soul, mind and will and sensation. It is in our family history, a predisposition to prejudice, to bitterness, to doubt and to despair. What is needed, and what the Sacrament of the Lord's Body and Blood offers, is something even more radical than what oncologists would like to offer, something that will replace our whole body and all of our blood, right down to the marrow, and our whole being with *His* Body and *His* Blood, given up for us in an innocent and unjust death, and raised by the Father Who loved us

and loves us just that much, by the Father Who loves us so much that He loses *everything* for us.

Only *His* Holy Spirit can make us so minded that we will accept such a gift, that we will accept such a diagnosis of our sin, that we will accept such a radical cure so that we may *live*. Our little minds cannot comprehend it, but our ears can hear it and with our mouths we can confess something beyond our sight and reason, the love of God and life forever with Him in a crust of bread and all the mercy of heaven in single sip of wine.

Let us now approach that gift together in prayer and in love for one another in Him Who stands among us by His Spirit and by His Word. I invite you to turn with me to page 48 in the forepart of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* and to pray with me the beautiful and very Lutheran 'Prayer of Humble Access' composed by Bishop Laud for the Church of England centuries ago: "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.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a Kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. ✠ Amen.

*S. D. G. !*