

Communion

If there is one thing that convinces me that evil is a real and active force in our world, it is how the greatest and most profound gifts of God are so regularly twisted into instruments of division, violence, and destruction.

There is no greater example of this than the Sacrament of Holy Communion. This is an awesome gift given to the Christian church directly by Jesus himself. The word “communion” actually means “sharing in common.” The sacrament is a gift meant to draw all Christians together in sharing a ritual that unifies us in the love of Christ.

Yet over the centuries, this amazing gift of sharing has not only failed to bring unity; it has caused more division in the church than any other issue. The flames of intolerance ignited by disagreements over the doctrine of communion have killed thousands upon thousands of people.

Difference of opinion over communion continues to be the primary barrier that divides Christians worship today. It continues to cause pain and resentment at funerals and awkwardness at weddings. It’s hard for me to think that is just random human weakness that causes such a pure blessing to be turned into an instrument of destruction.

This sacrament has elicited so many strong and unbending opinions that it is almost impossible to try to explain or discuss it without offending somebody.

So I’m not going to get entangled in arguments over whether bread and wine become the actual, physical body and blood of Jesus or whether this is strictly a ceremony of remembrance, or how often it should be offered, or who can offer it, or what do you do with the leftovers.

I fail to see how such arguments advance the kingdom of God.

Rather, I hope to explore briefly the question that Luther was always asking in his catechism: what does this mean? In this case, what does it mean for us when we take part in communion?

First of all, communion is a sacrament. For Luther, a sacrament has three requirements:

- 1) It is something commanded by Jesus. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus tells his disciples at the Last Supper to eat the bread and drink the wine, which he describes as his body and blood. In 1 Corinthians, Paul quotes Jesus as urging his followers to repeat this ritual.

- 2) It must use a common, everyday element that everyone has access to. A sacrament is not the privilege of the rich, nor is something only for those trained in the spiritual arts. It is for everyone, and the use of an everyday element ensures that it will be available for all.

Communion uses the common elements of bread and wine, which was standard supper fare in Jesus' time.

- 3) The sacrament must contain a gift, or promise. The nature of this gift or promise becomes clear in the three names we use for this sacrament:

The Lord's Supper. This is a remembrance and honoring of the Last Supper. It functions similarly to the Jewish Passover. In Exodus 12:14, the Israelites are told to set aside "a day of remembrance. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations, you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance."

Passover served the function that all profound rituals serve: as a way to ensure that you remember what God has done. To remember what should never be forgotten.

Jesus told his disciples to observe the ritual of the Lord's Supper in remembrance of him. As a way to remember the unfathomable sacrifice Jesus made during Holy Week, beginning with the Last Supper. Celebrating the Lord's Supper helps us remember what should never be forgotten.

Eucharist, which comes from a Greek word that means thanksgiving, celebration. The sacrament is a celebration of Easter, of renewal and rebirth, and of the confidence that we will, like Jesus, be raised to eternal life.

That is why we use language such as "now the feast and celebration" and refer to the eating and drinking as "a foretaste of the feast to come" when we are united with God in the life to come.

Holy communion, the name we most commonly use.

As I mentioned before, holy communion means holy sharing or holy togetherness. It is a ritual that binds us all together in Christ to be a part of something bigger than ourselves.

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10: The cup of blessing, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ: The bread that we break; is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?

You may notice the communion kits sitting on the altar during our Sunday services. Those are the communion kits that are going out to serve our shut-in members of our community who are not able to physically join us in worship. This reminds us that we are all in this together, in community, in communion, with one another in the name of Christ, even if we are not all able to be physically present.

We believe that in communion Jesus is present to us in a special way. How is he present? I have no any idea. We would do well to remember that Communion is a mystery in the true sense of the word. We don't know exactly what goes on in communion; and whenever churches have tried to pin it down, that's when they have produced bitterness and division.

Jesus is present in the sacrament of communion. That is all we can say, and it is all we need to say. There are times when people experience that presence in a very real and powerful way.

At my congregation in Iowa, I visited a young man in Des Moines, 70 miles away who had been confirmed in my congregation, whose parents were active members. He had married a Roman Catholic and attended her church with her, although he declined to officially convert.

I visited him at his parent's request because he was dying of cancer. At the end of the visit, I asked if he would like communion. He said, "Please." Greg, who had been upbeat during our visit, dissolved into tears during the sacrament.

His wife told me later that he had never made a big deal of being denied communion in his church all those years. But it hit him with overwhelming force when he was able to share in the sacrament again so near the end of his life. In the bread and wine, he experienced in a profound way, the true presence of Jesus such as he had never felt him.

That doesn't happen to everyone. Nor should we try to make it happen or feel that we are not in the right frame of mind if it doesn't. Jesus being present with us in communion does not depend on how hard we try to make it happen.

Accept that communion is a mystery and that whatever happens, happens. We experience the gift of Jesus' presence and that is all that really matters.