

“The Lord’s Supper”

1 Corinthians 11:23-29

The Sacrament of the Altar

How can bodily eating and drinking do such great things? This is the question concerning the teaching of the Lord’s Supper that we will consider this evening in our sermon. Of course, it is Luther’s question that he first asked in the *Small Catechism* and we read his answer together a short while ago.

I have an eight month old at home who seems to believe that only the milk mom provides for her is great and has the capability of doing great things for her. Peas? Carrots? Avocado? Sweet potato? Pears? Banana? Nope! Of course she will try them from time to time but not without a groan, grimace, and inevitable gagging sound.

This evening, though, we are reminded that the Lord offers us something to eat and drink that is altogether different and greater than peas, carrots, avocados, sweet potatoes, pears, and bananas. Through this eating and drinking we receive something greater than vitamins and nutrients. Luther reminds us that “forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation” are the great things, the benefits of eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ in the bread and the wine. So how can bodily eating and drinking bring about great things we need like forgiveness of sins, life and salvation for us?

Is it the eating and drinking of the body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar that brings about forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation for us? Certainly there is great power in eating and drinking. There is especially great intimacy that can come from eating and drinking together. If we want to get to know people better, we often eat and drink with them.

We have lunch with someone to develop a business relationship. One couple invites another couple over for a meal in order to strengthen the bond of a friendship. Parishes partake in potlucks to better learn about other members of the body of Christ and celebrate our life together as Christians. One of the Bible’s richest images to describe eternal life in the new heavens and earth upon Christ’s return is the image of a wedding feast. The bride, the Church, feasts with Christ, its bridegroom. Great intimacy can come from eating and drinking together, but eating and drinking alone do not bring this about.

Likewise, there is something more to the effectiveness of the Sacrament of the Altar than just eating and drinking. As Luther speaks about it in his answer to our question, the effectiveness of the Sacrament of the Altar has to do also with words.

Are our own words then the cause in the Sacrament of the Altar that brings about forgiveness, life, and salvation for us? In other words, is it my confession of faith that makes the eating and drinking of the

body and blood of Christ effective? Certainly a confession of faith is important. Throughout the centuries the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds especially have served as a strong, durable rudder to help the ship of the Church stay its faithful course. Our Lutheran Confessions are a helpful map, a true exposition of the Holy Scriptures, to navigate us through its terrain. Furthermore, the Apostle Paul tells us in the tenth chapter of his letter to the Romans that, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Ro 10:9).

Words are powerful. For some people words or phrases like "Holocaust," "9/11," or "Sandy Hook Elementary School" can trigger very emotional experiences. Words carry a lot of weight and can accomplish a lot. In the case of the Sacrament of the Altar, words are combined with our eating and drinking of the body and blood of Christ in the bread and the wine to make the Supper effective and bring about the great things of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Yet, simply put, the effective words are not our words, they are Christ's words. They are God's words.

When Jesus speaks, things happen! The eating and drinking in the Sacrament of the Altar effectively brings about the benefit of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation because Jesus' words are attached. His words carry great power.

As the Bible testifies, Jesus is the Word itself become flesh (Jn 1:1-3). Throughout his Public Ministry on earth, Jesus spoke things and his words performed. He said to the Centurion, "Go let it be done for you," and the healing was done (Mt 8:13). He said to the winds and the waves, "Be still," and they were stilled (Mk 4:39). He said to the demons, "Be quiet and come out of him," and they left (Lk 4:35). He spoke to a paralytic, "Take heart, your sins are forgiven," and they were forgiven (Mt 9:2). He spoke a blessing over a few loaves of bread and some fish and fed five thousand people (Lk 9:10-17). Jesus speaks and things happen. Specifically, good things happen. Jesus' words bring about health, wholeness, life, and forgiveness. They are words of promise that deliver.

So it was on the night when Jesus was betrayed. Jesus ate an intimate meal with his disciples and I am sure many words were spoken. Yet, the words that mattered most, the most effective words spoken that evening, were these: "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:28). These are words of promise from our Lord that we hear and believe in order to receive exactly what they say—forgiveness of sins. And where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

In the Sacrament of the Altar we perform the action of eating and drinking while trusting firmly the effective words of Jesus, "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." And we have exactly what they say. According to the Evangelist, St. John, there is another effective word that Jesus spoke, combined with his own consuming action. In the final hour of his death, "When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, 'It is finished,' and he bowed his head and gave up his Spirit" (Jn 19:30). The phrase, "It is finished" is the English translation of just one Greek word. A drink, a word, a sacrifice—for you. Your sins paid. Reconciliation with God. Forgiveness of sins. For you. It is done! Jesus said it, and when he speaks, things happen.

Now his effective sacrifice for the sin of the whole world comes to you in a cup for you to drink and in a piece of bread for you to eat. "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." These words, along with the bodily eating and drinking, are the main thing in the Sacrament. Amen.