

The Banquet

1 Cor 10:16-18, 11:23-29

Transfiguration Sunday

Today is a festival Sunday called The Transfiguration. It's a minor festival. Nevertheless, it is one that is celebrated every year at this time.

In Europe where they still perform operas they will perform Wagner's opera, "Parsifal," which has to do with the rediscovery of the Holy Grail. That, of course, refers to the Lord's Supper.

In the season of Epiphany we have had a series of sermons dealing with how the Word of God works. We come today to the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is seriously misunderstood among us. There are three kinds of misunderstanding.

The first misunderstanding has to do with thinking it has to do with the one who is celebrating it or presiding at it. We have a lot of thinking that it depends on the minister: We can only celebrate the Lord's Supper if we have an ordained pastor! That simply isn't the case. This is an ancient battle and goes back into the Third and Fourth centuries. It was a time of persecution of Christians. During the persecution some pastors and priests fell into denying Christ. Then after the persecution was over and they repented, the question was: Could they once again be clergy? After all, they had denied Christ, and the name for them was "traditor" or traitor. Could they celebrate Baptisms and the Lord's Supper?

The church thought about this and said, "Yes," because celebrating doesn't depend on the one doing it. Otherwise we'd never know if the Baptism or if the Lord's Supper really did what they do, because you don't know what the celebrant is thinking. He might be a person who is denying Christ. We would never be sure about what God is doing in the sacrament. It doesn't depend on the minister; it depends on God's Word.

And yet we fall into that trap all the time. It happens among us Lutherans. We let anybody preach, but only the ordained celebrate the Lord's Supper. It should be the other way around. It's hard to spoil the Lord's Supper, but it's easy to fumble when preaching.

The second way we misunderstand the Lord's Supper has to do with the person receiving it. We fall into the trap of saying: "You have to be somebody who is good." Even though we know very well it doesn't have to do with our goodness, we think the good people are those who go to church, and only good people can go to the Lord's Supper.

We misunderstand 1 Cor 11:27 which states: "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord." We mistake what is meant here about being "worthy." It really means the opposite: Those who go to the Lord's Supper and receive are not those who are "worthy"

and “good,” but those who come because they have a sense of what this is all about. It’s those outside of the congregation who think they’re good.

In the third place, the Lord’s Supper also doesn’t depend on how you do it. Probably most of us haven’t seen the opera, Parsifal. It’s six hours long! But with modern lighting and staging you can imagine the drama at the climactic discovery of the Holy Grail: The lights go down, except for a spotlight on the Holy Grail, the cup which glows in a mystical way. It’s quite an experience.

How do we make it happen? Just as we can fall into the trap called receptionism, that it depends on us, so we can fall into ritualism: It depends on the ritual. It depends on doing it just exactly right. A pastor, tired at the end of the second service one Sunday, as he was distributing the wine, said: “The body of Christ broken for you.” The pastor didn’t do it right! Oh, no. But it’s not a crisis.

Some say: You have to use a loaf of bread instead of wafers. You have to use real wine. What about grape juice? In the Roman Catholic Church, because they have a problem with the priests and alcohol, they made an inquiry to the company, Concord Grape Juice: Could they produce a grape juice that had just a little bit of wine in it? The company responded: The ordinary grape juice you buy in the grocery store already has a fraction of alcohol, and therefore you can use it for communion.

And what if the wafer falls on the floor? What if the wine spills on the floor? Is that a crisis? Is that what it’s about? Well, no.

The other extreme is also to be avoided. There are those who have said: “Let’s use coke and hamburgers.”

What is it really about? It comes out most easily in the discussion about how frequently you should go to the Lord’s Supper.

In Roman Catholic canon law it says you must go to confession once a year, and then you are to go to Mass every Sunday and on certain Holy Days. If you don’t make that, one of the subjects that comes up at confession is why you didn’t make it those times.

Over against that kind of legalism, Lutherans have said, No. This is a gift, but that doesn’t mean that it’s not very serious. In John 6:53 Jesus says: “Unless you eat my body and drink my blood you have no life in you.” In 1 Cor 10:18-21, after stating: When you partake of the bread, you participate in the body,” Paul adds: It’s “one loaf, one body.” He goes on to discuss eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols. He writes: “Obviously idols are nothing. Therefore meat offered to idols is nothing either. But what happens with those people who sacrifice meat to idols is that they are playing around with demons. And that’s a real danger, just as when we participate in the Lord’s Supper, this is then something real and serious.

That brings up a passage in the Large Catechism: In the section on the Lord's Supper, paragraph 42: "No one under any circumstances should be coerced or compelled Nevertheless, let it be understood that those who abstain and absent themselves from the sacrament over a long period of time should not be considered Christian. Christ did not institute it merely to be treated as a spectacle" (Tappert 451; Kolb/Wengert 471)

The Large Catechism is really for pastors. We look at the Small Catechism. The Small Catechism is not very long and is often printed in a small pamphlet. But what the editors leave out is the Preface to the Small Catechism. In the Preface Luther writes:

"He who does not highly esteem the sacrament suggests thereby that he has no sin, no flesh, no devil, no world, no death, no hell. That is to say, he believes in none of these, although he is deeply immersed in them and held captive by the devil. On the other hand, he suggests that he needs no grace, no life, no paradise, no heaven, no Christ, no God, nothing good at all. For if he believed he was involved in so much that is evil, and in need of so much that is good, he would not neglect the sacrament in which aid is afforded against such evil and in which such good is bestowed. It would not be necessary to compel him by any law to receive the sacrament, he would hasten to it of his own accord, he will feel constrained to receive it, he will insist that you administer it to him.

"Accordingly you are not to make a law of this, as the Pope has done. All you need to do is clearly to set forth the advantage and the disadvantage, the benefit and the loss, the blessing and the danger, connected with this sacrament. Then the people will come of their own accord, without compulsion. But if they refuse to come, let them be, and tell them that those who do not feel or acknowledge their great need and God's gracious help belong to the devil."¹

This is very serious business. What's going on here?! What's going on is: Not in us. Not in the one celebrating. Not the bread and the wine and the water in Baptism. It's in God's Word. And the question is whether God's Word is what we state it to be. God's Word is effective. You remember the parable of the seed growing secretly (Mark 4:26-29). In Greek the key word for this is the same as we have in English: "automate" – automatically (by itself). God is doing it. As a result, we have great confidence and great hope.

Through his Word, because of his promise, we have forgiveness and life. It is in the doing of it (the *usus*) that this all takes place. Finally it says in the celebration of the Lord's Supper: "For you." This is the second person singular. Not the second person plural. In English, in contrast to most languages, this distinction has been lost.

¹ Small Catechism, Preface, ¶¶ 23 and 24 (Tappert 341; Kolb/Wengert 350-51).

The reason for having the Lord's Supper is that when the Word is proclaimed, of course, God is doing his work, and it is of great comfort to us that it is done directly, as in Baptism the little one is individually baptized, so in the Lord's Supper each one of us individually receives the forgiveness and the life that he gives.

What's at stake here is whether Christianity is true at all because if it's true, this is enormous. If it's not true, this is just a charade. The promise is true. God's Word and promises, not our promises. He does what he says. Amen