

The Lord's Supper gives light and life

Luke 6:17-26

A Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

The season of Epiphany is the season of the coming of the light. Today we look at how the Lord's Supper gives light and life. It is important for us Lutherans to hear know what this means.

Luther has remarkable things to say about this, but first, I want to tell you about what one Lutheran pastor did to help his people see the light.

It was a regular Sunday morning worship service. He had preached the sermon. The offering had been taken. It was time to begin the liturgy for communion. Before starting that, he called the ushers to come forward again and handed them each a pile of \$20 bills. Then he asked them to give a \$20 bill to each person there that day.

He said he wasn't giving out big money. It was a little bit of money, but it was to be truly a gift with no strings attached. Because the offering had already been collected, no one could put their \$20 bill back in the collection plate.

The pastor also made it clear that he was not handing out money so they could invest it in order to make money for the church, and thereby learn a less in investing and giving. No, this was simply a gift to those who came to church that day.

He noted that he could have put all that money in a basket and had a lottery and then one winner would get the spoils. But that's not the way the Lord works and that's not the way the Lord's Supper works. It's not by chance or a lottery.

The gift is for those who come, eat, and drink. This is simply given to you.

You may say that's merely \$20. Not a big deal. But what that \$20 symbolizes is that it's free, it's yours, and it's priceless.

That pastor was helping his people catch on to what Luther writes about the Lord's Supper. Luther says, in effect, don't miss out. Go to the Lord's Supper whenever it's offered; it's free, it's yours, and it's priceless.

You may object and say: "Life is busy and complicated." Think of Luke 14:15-24 about the banquet. A man was giving a banquet and he announced the time to come. One says: "I can't. I've just bought some oxen and I need to go look at the them." Another says: "I've just bought a field and I have to go and look at it." And the third one says: "I just got married." What happens is people say: "We're busy." We have real excuses, whatever they are.

Of course, behind all of them is a trust in "good works" and thinking we really don't have a big problem. We really don't need it. Luther talks about that. He writes:

“Those who do not hold the sacrament (of the Lord’s Supper) in high esteem indicate that they have no sin, no flesh, no devil, no world, no death, no dangers, no hell. That is, they *believe* they have none of these things, although they are up to their neck in them and belong to the devil twice over. On the other hand, they indicate that they need no grace, no life, no paradise, no heaven, no Christ, no God, nor any other good thing. For if they believed that they had so much evil and needed so much good, they would not neglect the sacrament, in which help against such evil is provided and in which so much good is given” (Small Catechism, Preface 23; Tappert 341, Kolb/Wengert 350).

When we feel we’re doing fine, we don’t need it, is when we need it more than ever.

You may have questions. What about the problem of being “worthy.” 1 Corinthians 11:27 says: “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.” What is this about?

The early Christians celebrated an agape meal (disappeared after a few decades), which included “communion,” so there was a real meal. The rich came early or on time and ate up the food, so that the slaves, who had to serve their masters before joining the meal, were short-changed. This was an offense against the body, the communion, this was acting in an unworthy manner.

Centuries later people asked: “Am I worthy? Do I feel repentant enough? Have I repented of all my sins and not forgotten some?”

Luther speaks to this concern:

“For it [the Lord’s Supper] is not founded on human holiness but on the Word of God . . . [which] is not rendered false because of an individual’s unworthiness or unbelief. Christ does not say: ‘If you believe or if you are worthy, you have my body and blood,’ but rather, ‘Take, eat and drink, this is my body and blood’” (Large Catechism, 5:16; Tappert 448, Kolb/Wengert 468).

And he writes about what we are to do and not do:

“We should set little value on our work but exalt and magnify God’s Word. We should go to confession not as if we wanted to perform a magnificent work to present to him, but simply to accept and receive something from him. You dare not come and say how good or how wicked you are” (Large Catechism, 5, A Brief Exhortation to Confession 18; Tappert 459, Kolb/Wengert 468).

Because the Lord’s Supper is so good for us, should we make it a law?

In the Roman Catholic Church attendance at Mass is required every Sunday, and when you are on vacation, you are to find a Catholic church and go to Mass. That’s a church law. It doesn’t work to have excuses.

Luther, however, says we are not to make a law of this and he tells pastors:

“All you need to do is clearly set forth the advantage and disadvantage, the benefit and the loss, the danger and the salvation in this sacrament. Then people will come of their own accord and without compulsion. But if they refuse to come, let them be, and tell them that those who do not feel and acknowledge their great need and God’s gracious help belong to the devil. (Small Catechism, Preface 24, Tappert 341; Kolb/Wengert 351) (See also Large Catechism, 5.42; Tappert 451, Kolb/Wengert 471).

What is this Lord’s Supper about?

This then comes to the texts in Luke for last week, today, and next Sunday. In last week’s text (Luke 5:1-11), the disciples catch so many fish that their boats were filled and sinking. When the Lord gives, remember what happens. Suddenly they realize that this is the kind of Lord we have.

In our text for today it says: “All the crowd sought to touch him, for power came forth from him and he healed them all” (Luke 6:19). He heals broken minds and broken bodies.

In next Sunday’s text it says of what will be given to you: “good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap” (Luke 6:38).

This is the kind of Lord we have.

We fall into the trap of thinking: “We don’t really need that.” We think there’s something we need more than forgiveness, redemption, and life forever. That’s what it’s about.

Is there something we need to do to make it happen?

No, it doesn’t depend on “anything we are, think, say, or do” (Smalcald Articles 3/3/36; Tappert 309, Kolb/Wengert 318). It doesn’t depend on us. The Lord does it, and that’s the glory of it, and we need it.

Then there is nothing left to do but celebrate. This is here; this is ours, and it comes to us in a particular way in the Lord’s Supper. It’s true we use words, but there is also that we can touch, taste, and smell. It comes to us, our bodies and our minds, in the eating and drinking, even as it doesn’t depend on us. The Lord does it for us. Amen.