

MAUNDY THURSDAY
1 Corinthians 11:23-32

In many ways, when it comes to the Lord's Supper, we get a glimpse into what divides a number of Christian denominations and churches. The question is this: Does God mean what He says or must what God says be interpreted to mean something else? Do we let Scripture interpret Scripture, in which case the Bible clearly teaches that Baptism saves and that we receive Christ's Body and Blood sacramentally in Holy Communion, or do we interpret Scripture away according to our understanding of things, so that Baptism can't possibly save, being water, after all, and the Lord's Supper can't possibly include Christ's Body and Blood, because that seems unreasonable? As confessional Lutherans, we believe and teach the former, that God's Word stands forever and must prevail over fallen human reason and personal preferences.

This is a big issue in the church today, because people are easily offended when told that there are differences between our churches and theirs, and that those differences are important. Tolerating other opinions does not mean agreeing that they are right, but our culture sometimes forgets that, and so some people might even take it as a personal slight or insult when faced with the Bible's teaching on fellowship, for example. Are we saying they're not a Christian, they might wonder, when we tell them they cannot commune in our parishes until they are instructed and confess the same Scriptural faith regarding the Supper and the chief parts of the Catechism, with is nothing but a summary of God's Word? No, you know that we are of course not saying that they aren't a Christian. Rather, what we are saying is that God's Word must be supreme in the church, and that, because it is His Word, it's not ours to compromise or bend on a whim.

It is no tiny thing if one church confesses that what Christ says is true when He says that we receive His Body and Blood in the Supper and another says instead that it is only bread and wine. And we should not be ashamed to point out the important implications of such disagreement, which is not over externals, but over the very substance of the faith. While they would surely not say it this way, those who deny Christ's plain words regarding the Supper and His real presence are in essence making a statement, and that statement, if logically considered, is that Christ is either a liar, a poor wordsmith, or insane, unable to speak clearly and for Himself. You would not want someone to twist your words. Why then would we be all right with someone twisting our Lord's words. Can anything be more precious, true, and worth preserving and defending than the last will and testament of our God who became man to save us from sin, death, and the devil, and spoke these words on the very night He was betrayed?

And even more, when a Christian from another church body claims they are offended by our Biblical teaching and practice and accuses us of being unchristian or unloving for following Christ, the King of Love, and taking Him at His Word, what they often do not realize is that they are in fact the ones insulting us and passing judgment. We would not dare to go into their parish and try to impose our will and teaching upon them, at least I would hope we would not, but that is what they in essence are doing to us. We ought not to be ashamed to follow Christ's Word, then, when it comes to the Sacraments or to the fellowship we rightly practice regarding Communion. We are practicing the faith handed down by the saints and enshrined in the Word. We are exercising love, warning those who have been misled by false teaching of the real danger of allowing the teachings of men to supersede the teachings of our Lord. We are looking out for their best interest, not wanting them to receive the Lord's Body and Blood to their judgment, as St. Paul says happens to those who approach the Supper unworthily, impenitently, or unaware of what they actually receive and confess in doing so.

We are saved by faith, and God will not despise saving faith, be it ever so weak and confused. The Christian who believes Jesus died for his or her sins, whether or not they have erred in other articles of the faith that do not directly impinge on that teaching, can indeed be saved, and we pray for their salvation. That is what we mean when we speak about saving faith. But that does not mean that such error is insignificant. God also calls us to have specific faith, that is, faith in the specific teachings taught in His Word, like the Lord's Supper. All error, if thought through, casts doubt upon the ultimate truth, the second article of the creed, the very facts of our redemption. Would you serve a guest food with just a little poison in it and think that proper? No, you would want them to have food with no poison at all. Poison, even in small doses, is harmful, and false teaching, like sinful living, poisons faith. And that is where our fellowship practices come in to play. They are intended to protect and warn. They protect the flock from wolves and warn those in error to return to the safety of God's revealed Word.

St. Paul told the Corinthians when he spoke about the Lord's Supper in the tenth and eleventh chapters of his first letter to them, ***"I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized"*** (11:18,19). We do not separate from other Christians who teach incorrectly in some areas of the Christian faith because we are divisive, do not like them, or want to tear the church of Christ asunder, but because we must do so to confess the truth and maintain true unity, which is found only in a common confession of the Word of Christ as He has actually spoken and meant it. As Jesus prayed in His great high-priestly prayer, ***"Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth."***

Imagine when you were a child if your parents had bought you a brand new bike and you kept leaving it out in the front yard overnight. What would that tell them about how much you appreciated their sacrifice and the price they had paid to purchase it for you? Even more, our heavenly Father has given us His very Son and His Son's clear words. We will see what a price He has paid to reveal God's love to us tomorrow. What does it say about our appreciation of that if we do not guard His Words and treat them like they matter?

But Pastor, you might think, Jesus also said that He is the Door and the Vine. Is He literally a door and a vine? Of course not. What did He do what after He said those things? He explained how He meant them. He made clear that He was using a metaphor. He does not such thing in the Lord's Supper. In fact, He explains that He means exactly what He says. This is the Body given and the Blood poured out for us. And St. Paul removes all doubt, insisting in his first letter to the Corinthians that there is no metaphor involved. Jesus means what He says and says what He means. Our second lesson is a prime example of letting Scripture interpret Scripture.

What a great comfort it should be and is for us that our Jesus loves us so much that He has left us physical assurance of His salvation. He not only speaks to us through called servants, but He uses water, bread, and wine to drive the message home and make us His own, to create and feed our faith. And what is unreasonable about that marvelous fact when we consider that our Lord God is involved. God became an infant Child while remaining the One in whom ***"we live and move and have our being"*** (Acts 17:28)? How can He not also then give us His Body and Blood in the Sacrament if He so chooses when He has taken up again His full use of His divine powers and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty? When we so easily doubt, what more could we ask for than such plain, direct, and personal guarantees and seals of His grace? As our Lord prepared to be betrayed, He ordained and left to us an enduring sign of, testament to, and vehicle for His faithfulness and love. Cherish it. Confess it. Find forgiveness and true unity in the celebration of it. Amen.

