

April 6, 2023
Holy Thursday
Matthew 26:17–30

I.N.I.

Sermon preached by the Rev. Richard A. Lammert at Zion Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, IN

Theme: “For You, O My People”

In the name of ✠ Jesus. **Amen.**

“Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night He was betrayed . . .” We hear these words every Sunday, and now we are at that night. It is true that in our Gospel reading we do not hear directly about the betrayal itself—that comes in the following verses in the Gospel. But Jesus has prepared His disciples—as well as us—for that betrayal, as He indicates that Judas would betray Him.

The words we hear every Sunday are slightly different from what we just heard in the Gospel. The words that Pastor chants on Sundays are taken from a combination of the accounts of the institution of the Lord’s Supper in the New Testament. As we hear the words on Sunday (and again a little later this evening), the words “for you” occur twice.

Those two words, “for you,” are so important that Luther uses them four more times—in addition to the two times in the Words of Institution—in his explanation of the Sacrament of the Altar in the Small Catechism. The *you* that Jesus addresses is very specific. Luther finishes his explanation of the Lord’s Supper by saying, “the words ‘for you’ require all hearts to believe.”

In order to give context to that “for you,” I will borrow a phrase from our Old Testament reading from Ezekiel several Sundays ago, where God addresses His people as “O my people” (Ezek. 37:12, 13). We consider our Gospel reading with the theme “For You, O My People.”

We hear the Words of Institution so often that they have become commonplace for us. There is certainly nothing wrong with that, and that is the way it should be. There are several mysteries here in our text, however, that we might miss if we approach our text with a “been there, done that” mental stance.

It is not just I who use the word *mystery*. Our Collect for the Day used the word: “Grant that we may so receive the sacred *mystery* of Your body and blood that the fruits of Your redemption may continually be manifest in us.”

I can find at least three individual mysteries in our text for us to consider before we approach our topic of “For You, O My People.” The first two must remain mysteries at least on this side of heaven, but the third one is a mystery that Scripture itself explains for us.

We find the first mystery in the last part of Jesus’ words in instituting the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper: “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:27–28). There it is: “my blood,

which *is* poured out.”

We are now at Thursday evening, exactly as Jesus and His disciples were almost two thousand years ago. Jesus’ blood would not be poured out, shed, on the cross of Calvary until the next day. Yet Jesus could call the blood He gave His disciples His blood which *is* poured out. Now, we could say that Jesus, as the incarnate Son of God, was not limited by time. We might say that events had been set in motion that would inevitably end in His crucifixion so that, even now, Jesus’ blood was being poured out.

But I don’t think we need to try to explain this. We should, instead, use this mystery to help our own faith. If Jesus could offer His blood to the disciples even *before* shedding His blood, He can certainly offer His blood to us *after* the day of crucifixion.

The second mystery is one that is well-known to us. Jesus broke bread and gave it to His disciples, saying “This is my body.” He gave them a cup of wine and said, “This is my blood.” This mystery has no explanation. Certainly, theologians throughout the ages have tried to develop several theories of “how this can be,” but it remains a Christian mystery.

Ultimately, we simply accept the mystery, and proclaim, as we will in a few moments, with the hymn writer of our Communion hymn: “His Word proclaims and we believe / That in this Supper we receive / His very body, as He said, His very blood for sinners shed. / We dare not ask how this can be, / But simply hold the mystery / And trust this word where life begins: / ‘Given and shed for all your sins’” (LSB 634,4–5). I believe this is the mystery to which our Collect of the Day refers.

There is a third mystery, one that the disciples, as born and bred Jews, would certainly have recognized: Jesus told His disciples “take, eat; this is my body”; “take, drink, this is my blood.” How could Jesus ask His disciples to do something that the Mosaic law forbids, eating human flesh and drinking human blood? How could Jesus make such a fundamental mistake in what He was asking of His disciples?

Jesus was not making a mistake. Nor was He ignoring the Mosaic commandment. Nor was He breaking the Mosaic commandment. Nor was He simply *changing* the commandment.

God gave the laws to the Jewish nation through Moses. We think of Moses as a lawgiver, but Moses was simply the mediator between God and God’s people. The almighty, eternal God was the source of the law. And God’s people needed to obey those commands.

Everything was different now that Jesus Christ was on the earth. At the Transfiguration, as we heard a few weeks ago, the voice of God the Father from heaven proclaimed, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him” (Matt. 17:5). No longer are we commanded to listen to Moses; we are commanded to listen to *Jesus*.

God originally gave commands through Moses. But now, that same God, the divine Son of God, had taken on human flesh, and was born as Jesus Christ. God no longer needs to mediate His commands through Moses. God Himself was sitting with the disciples in that upper room.

Jesus Christ embodied all that God is. There is no longer any need for the old commands. Thus, it is too simplistic (and probably inaccurate) to say that God *changed* the

commands. Rather, he *superseded*, in His own person, the old commands. Jesus also limits the new eating and drinking to His own body and blood. He bids you to eat His body and drink His blood. And He does that “for you, O My people.” Listen to Jesus. Jesus is over and above any of the old commandments.

The writer to the Hebrews reminds us at the end of our reading that “indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Heb. 9:22). Jesus, as God incarnate, can *supersede* the old law, but He cannot change the *nature* of God: “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.”

In our reading from Exodus we heard how Moses inaugurated the covenant between God and the Israelites. Moses had recited in the hearing of the people all the commandments that God had given him while he was on Mount Sinai. The people responded, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient” (Exod. 24:7).

Thereupon, Moses took the blood of the sacrifices, throwing it upon the people, and proclaiming, “Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words” (Exod. 24:8). Even though Moses does not call this blood the blood for the forgiveness of sins, the writer to the Hebrews certainly understands it in that way by speaking about the blood that purifies and sanctifies.

Indeed, one must conclude that the blood of the covenant did in fact purify and sanctify, that is, that it forgave the sins of those people so that they could stand before God and live—since a sinner, an unholy person, cannot stand in the presence of the holy God. And that is precisely what we hear at the end of our reading from Exodus. Seventy-three men accompanied Moses up the mountain to behold God, and to eat and drink with Him.

Since God cannot deny His own nature, there must be the shedding of blood for us poor sinners to receive the forgiveness of sins. We cannot get around it. The Pauline epistles certainly stress that each of us is justified by faith. But we cannot skip over the shedding of blood. Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins; without the forgiveness of sins, there is no justification, by faith or otherwise.

The old law required the daily, weekly, and yearly offerings of sacrifices. Without those continuing sacrifices, the Israelites could not be the holy people that God had called them to be. But the writer to the Hebrews states, “[Christ] entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption” (Heb. 9:12). We might say that even here our Lord supersedes the old laws. This “once for all” sacrifice of the blood of Jesus Christ supersedes all the other sacrifices, making them not only unnecessary but also ungodly.

Jesus offers his own sacrificial body and blood to us, “for you, O My people.” And who are God’s people, those for whom Christ offers here His body and blood? Luther answers: “That person is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: ‘Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.’ But anyone who does not believe these words or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared, for the words ‘for you’ require all hearts to believe.”

You have been baptized into the death of Christ. You have been catechized. You have

confirmed your belief in your Lord Jesus Christ in your confirmation. You have confirmed your belief that Jesus gives in this Holy Sacrament His body and blood for the forgiveness of sin. You are God's people, the "O My people" whom God addresses here: "For you, O My people."

It is "for you" that our Lord instituted this Holy Supper. Quoting Martin Luther again on the benefit of the sacrament: "These words, 'Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins,' show us that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation."

"But," you might respond, "didn't I just hear the Pastor say, 'Upon this your confession . . . I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'? Isn't that enough?" I could answer truthfully, "yes," and stop there. But I won't stop there, because our Lord doesn't stop there.

You have probably heard about the proverbial husband—at least, I hope he's proverbial—who told his wife, "Of course I still love you. I told you that when I married you, and if I ever change my mind, I'll let you know." Our Lord is not like that proverbial husband.

Our Lord does not stop with "that's sufficient for you; nothing more is needed." He takes care of His bride, the Church. He looks after His bride, the Church—you and me. He well knows that we fight daily against the wiles of the devil, the siren call of the world, and the evil desires of our own flesh. He well knows that we must daily drown the old Adam, knowing that we have been called to repentance and to live a life in the Spirit. He well knows that it is impossible for us to refrain from sinning, as long as we remain in this physical body of sin and death.

Accordingly, our Lord doesn't stop with "it is sufficient for you." He wants His bride, His people, to know that His sacrificial death was for His people, "for you, O My people." When the Pastor's hand places Christ's body in your hand or in your mouth, you can be certain that He died "for you." When the deacon sprinkles your tongue with Christ's blood—not externally, as in the old covenant—you can be certain that He died "for you."

You can be certain that He *died* for you. St. Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). It is the death of Jesus, that ignominious death on the cross of Calvary, that won for you salvation by the shedding of His own blood. Now, in this glorious sacrament, Jesus offers to you that forgiveness of sins. He has already paid for the sins of all people, but here in the sacrament, He tells you that He has paid specifically for *your* sins and that you have the forgiveness of those sins.

Come, taste and see that the Lord is good. Come, take the visible reminder of our Lord's death upon your lips and in your mouth. Our Lord assures us that all this is "for you, O My people."

In the name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**