

“THE VALUE OF FELLOWSHIP”

Holy (Maundy) Thursday

April 19, 2025

Zion Lutheran Church

Fort Wayne, Indiana

TEXT:

Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near. Hebrews 10:24, 25 (ESV)

I've always had some degree of hesitation when it comes to preaching on this particular text of Scripture. In homiletics class at the seminary, the sainted Dr. Henry Eggold told us never to preach about not coming to church to people who obviously have come to church. I especially have some misgivings about preaching on this text tonight, since this is, after all, Holy or Maundy Thursday--the day when we remember our Savior's betrayal and arrest and also celebrate His institution of Sacrament of the Altar. But I think I can live with myself on both counts this evening. In the three-year lectionary, this text is part of the Epistle for Holy Thursday, and I'm not going to preach about not coming to church anyway, although I do plan to deal with what the Word of God has to say about why we ought to come to the Lord's table often and eagerly.

In Luke's Gospel we are told that when Jesus and His disciples gathered in that upper room on that Thursday night, the Lord began the observance by telling them: "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (*Luke 22:15*). We can tell also from three of the Gospels that the Lord took a great deal of care in making sure that all of the preparations were made ahead of time for the Seder meal that they were to share. Clearly, this was not just another meal for Jesus; this was important. It wasn't just a supper; it was the Passover. It wasn't just the Passover; it was the last Passover that He was to celebrate on earth. And it wasn't just a group of people that He was celebrating with; it was His chosen disciples--probably the closest thing to a family that He had at that point in His life. I think it's safe to say that He longed for this celebration with His disciples. The attitude that Jesus had as He approached that Last Supper is the same attitude that we should have as we approach the Sacrament that He instituted that night. Why is our gathering together at the Lord's table so important? Because here we receive from the Lord His gifts of grace: forgiveness, life, and salvation--all manifested in His true body and blood, given and shed for us. And here we also encourage one another as we anticipate our Savior's return in glory.

What did the disciples receive from the Lord that night and what do we receive from the Lord when we come to His Supper? The answer is obvious: food. Food is nourishment, and it has always been an essential part of fellowship. Whenever people gather together there is usually food of one kind or another: sometimes a full-course meal; at times a light lunch; a lot of times just snacks. Food is usually a pretty big part of church gatherings in particular. As a matter of fact, quite a number of years ago the Lutheran Witness published an article in which the author said that maybe we emphasize food a little too much in the Church--that, in a society where a significant part of the population has a chronic problem with obesity, perhaps we should downplay food a bit. But be that as it may, food is usually at the center of most gatherings, and for symbolic reasons as well: Food, which is essential to life, is shared by those who have come together, emphasizing the importance of what they have in common.

When Jesus distributed the bread and the cup to His disciples (which, by the way, was the third cup of the Seder meal--the Cup of Redemption or Blessing), He gave a new and powerful meaning to these elements of the Passover. "Take, eat," He said, "This is My body, which is given for you" (*Matthew 26:26; Luke 22:19*). "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" (*Matthew 26:27, 28*). In these elements and the Word with which He gave them Jesus was giving His disciples real spiritual food, and He gives that same spiritual food to you and me every time that we come to this altar and receive His Supper. As the ancient Israelites partook of the Passover lamb that had been slain for their sins and thereby literally made that sacrifice their very own, so we partake of the Lamb of God who once and for all sacrificed Himself on the altar of the cross for our sins, and in this way we make His sacrifice our own. In these simple, commonplace elements of bread and wine, the Lord gives us His true body and blood as spiritual food, visibly and tangibly reminding us of what He did for us and strengthening our faith with this food by connecting us with the sacrifice that He made for us.

There is also something else that comes into play here. It's not just the food that makes a meal special. As important as the food is, a meal is also special because of who you are sharing it with. The disciples of Jesus who were gathered together in that upper room that night were a spiritual family of sorts. They were one in faith and doctrine and confession. Whether they were aware of it or not, simply by their presence they were giving encouragement to one another--encouragement that would be sorely needed later that evening and over the next few days as they faced the greatest trials and temptations of their lives up to that point. They would see their Lord--the One in whom they trusted with full confidence--betrayed and arrested and then, in fear and terror, they would flee for their very lives, not to come out of hiding until Easter when they were confronted and comforted by their slain and risen Savior.

We today are in a similar situation, even though we might not be any more aware of it than those disciples were on that first Holy Thursday. We, too, are one with one another in what we believe, teach, and confess. We, too, are going to leave here tonight (as we do after every worship service) and we're going to walk right back into that world of temptation and sin from which we came. We're going to be confronted with all kinds of trials and tribulations, and what will be our strength to resist and endure? Our faith in Christ, of course. And that faith is strong because it has been fed with the spiritual food that Christ gives us in the Sacrament and also because of the encouragement that we receive from one another when we come together at the Lord's table. Somehow temptation seems to be a little easier to face when you know that you're not facing it alone.

There is ample reason for us to heed the advice given to us in this evening's text by the writer to the Hebrews about not falling into the habit of neglecting the fellowship of Word and Sacrament that we share. Here we receive the food that nourishes our faith in Christ. Here we celebrate our oneness in Him. Here we are encouraged by one another's presence and support as we leave this place to continue "fight[ing] the good fight of the faith" (*1 Timothy 6:12*) in the world. This experience of fellowship is not something for us to avoid. On the contrary, it is something to be valued. Seeking His grace and strength, let's not just come here to His table; let us eagerly desire to do so, joyfully anticipating the day when we will enjoy perfect fellowship with our Lord and with one another in His kingdom of glory.

Amen.

May the One who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, making us kings and priests before His God and Father, lead you to a life of repentance and trust. May He also be glorified in the lives of you, His people. He who calls you is faithful, and He will do it. Amen.