

**+ 1 Corinthians 11:23-28 + Fix Your Eyes on Jesus—The Great Forgiver!<sup>1</sup> +  
+ Holy Thursday + Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + 13 April 2017 +**

There is little sense of the sacred anymore in western culture. There is little that is treated with reverence. Enter a cathedral and you see signs encouraging visitors to take their hats off and keep their mouths shut. It's not a given. Now there are some locations where there still is a certain sense of reverence. Visit a place where a great tragedy took place like one of the 9/11 sites or visit burial sites like Arlington Cemetery or Lincoln's tomb. Yet even in those places, there are reminders to be quiet and to keep selfies to a minimum. Some have described America's iconic ballparks, arenas, and stadiums as "cathedrals" and "sacred places." Watch the presentation of the Lombardi Trophy after a Super Bowl win or the presentation of World Series rings and the raising of championship banners and you see much joy, but yet there is a certain "reverence" to it all with all the pomp and circumstance of a liturgical order of service.

Yet travel to other parts of our world and you will still find a reverent regard for the truly sacred. For example, certain holy sites in the city of Jerusalem or elsewhere in Israel require a certain reverent (or at least respectable) decorum. That means at some of those sites they don't allow you to wear shorts or a tank top. You have to cover up. Now what results can be a little silly, especially when you see grown men walking around with what's basically a skirt covering their bare legs because they wore shorts, but the point is, at some of those holy sites, people expect you to treat that place with respect and reverence. That's understandable when you consider what took place at some of those sites.

Now this evening we begin a journey to some of those ancient, holy sites through some of the holiest days in the Christian church year. For centuries, the time between Maundy or Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday has been a time of great reverence, of quiet meditation, and of joyful celebration. It's the time of year when we are often most focused on Christ, when our eyes are fixed most on Jesus, on why he came for us, and on what he accomplished for us. There's good reason why this week is called Holy Week because we fix our eyes on the Great Forgiver.

On Sunday, the humble King entered Jerusalem surrounded by crowds and riding on the back of a young, unbroken donkey. Tonight we find Jesus in a large, second floor room reclining at a table with just his twelve disciples. On that table are all the elements of the ancient Passover celebration including unleavened bread, grape wine, bitter herbs, and roasted lamb. We find them celebrating the holy festival of Passover with a reverent order of service full of visible and physical and audible reminders of the ways that God had delivered his people from slavery in Egypt 1,500 years before. It was a celebration that Jesus and his disciples had partaken of every spring since they were children. Passover was one of the holiest, most joyful celebrations in the Jewish religious year, but that Thursday night was different. A heavy cloud of confusion, fear, worry, and sorrow hung over the room. Jesus knew what was coming, and though with divine foresight, he had explained all this to his disciples several times, they never seemed to catch on. Yet every last one of them knew that tonight something bad was going to happen to Jesus.

Jesus knew that he would face betrayal and suffering and injustice and ridicule and pain and death starting in just a few hours. So what did Jesus do? What could Jesus do for his sad, worried followers who would all fall away from him that very night? In the past three years, Jesus had demonstrated to them that he was the righteous Victor, the saving Son, the living Water, the revealing Light, the Author of life, and the humble King, but tonight he would demonstrate to them that he is and always would be the Great Forgiver.

During the Passover celebration, Jesus departed from the old order of things and did something new. He took some of the unleavened bread, gave thanks, and broke it into pieces handing them out to his disciples. **"Take and eat; this is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."** (Matthew 26:26; 1 Corinthians 11:24) As Jesus gave them the bread, he was also giving them something much more, something **"for you."** He was giving them himself—his body that would soon be sacrificed on the cross. Later after they had eaten the Passover supper, Jesus took a cup of wine, gave thanks, and gave it to his disciples. **"Drink from it all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."** (Matthew 26:27-28; 1 Corinthians 11:25) As Jesus gave the wine, he was giving something much more, something that brings forgiveness for many. He was giving them himself—his blood that would soon be poured out for the sins of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the thoughts and language in this sermon were received with thanks from Pr. Aaron Christie.

Now for those disciples, Jesus going “off script” was surprising enough, but then to give them his body and blood with the unleavened bread and wine. Surely there were some confused looks on their faces or wondering questions in their minds. Days later after the events of Jesus’ Passion and resurrection, they would understand. They would realize that Jesus was giving them forgiveness that they could touch and taste and see not just that day, but for the rest of their lives as they celebrated that Holy Supper again and again, but that night they were confused. They didn’t realize that while it was a bite of bread and a swallow of wine, it was also Christ’s greatest gift—himself with those words **“for you”** attached like a gift tag. “My forgiveness is for you in this Supper because you receive what I am earning for you—forgiveness for all your sins and guilt to make you right with God.” In the days after his resurrection, that Supper and those words **“for you”** would connect Christ’s followers of every generation to his forgiveness.

So why do we find the Apostle Paul writing so strongly about Christ’s Holy Supper to the Christians in Corinth? Remember what I said before how there seems to be no sense of the sacred or reverence anymore? Well, it was much, much worse in Corinth. Instead of a feast of forgiveness and salvation, the Corinthians had turned it into a feast of self-indulgence. It seems they regularly held a meal called an *agape feast*, a love feast. This meal included the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, but it was basically a Holy Thursday potluck meal with plenty of wine flowing in the fellowship area before the people came to the Lord’s Table.

Drunkenness wasn’t the only issue though. Some elbowed others out in an effort to get what they wanted. Others viewed the Lord’s Supper as an opportunity to cure a hungry belly. On top of all that, instead of a wonderful unity rooted in God’s Word, they celebrated their own petty factions. They were sanctifying their lovelessness and self-indulgence before the Lord!

So what did Paul do? He took them back to what the Lord had taught him. You see, Paul was not among the apostles with Jesus in the Upper Room on Holy Thursday evening. He was not present for the institution of the Holy Supper, so God had to teach him, and like a runner passing a baton, Paul passed on to them the clear words of Jesus. Paul called them to turn aside from their agendas and appetites. “This isn’t your supper. This is Christ’s Holy Supper. This meal is God’s gracious gift for you, not a toy. This meal proclaims Christ’s sacrifice for you! Yes, it is a time for joy, but not a time to cut loose with friends.”

Paul pointed out to them how this Supper was **“for you,”** how Christ, the Great Forgiver, had given it to connect each believer to himself and to what he accomplished in his suffering and death. That’s why Paul is so concerned about partaking of Christ’s Holy Supper in **“an unworthy manner.”** He’s not talking about “unworthy sinners,” since every person who receives this Supper, including the pastor who administers it, is an unworthy sinner before God, but partaking of it in **“an unworthy manner.”**

This Holy Supper is rightly to be received in a reverent way. Christ’s Holy Supper is for my forgiveness. Therefore, I need to recognize my need for forgiveness. In the Supper, we receive Christ’s body and blood with bread and wine. Therefore, in simple faith, we rejoice in Jesus’ real presence, rather than rationalize it away. A worthy, faith-filled reception of the Lord’s Supper is one that simply takes God at his Word regarding what Christ’s Holy Supper is, gives, and means.

That’s also why Paul urged his readers to examine themselves before coming to the Lord’s Table. He doesn’t mean that God’s people need to jump through all kinds of penitential hoops to make themselves worthy of receiving Christ’s Supper. Instead we ask ourselves simple questions. “Have I sinned against God and need Christ’s forgiveness?” “Does Jesus give me this forgiveness in his Supper?” “Do I believe that Jesus truly gives me his body and blood with bread and wine in this meal?” “Am I united in heart and mind in what this body of believers believes and teaches?” If I can honestly answer “Yes” to those questions trusting these words **“given and poured out for you,”** then I am properly prepared to receive this blessed meal.

So here we are. Unlike the apostles in the Upper Room, we’re not confused. Unlike the Corinthians, the celebration of Christ’s Holy Supper is not a free-for-all here. Yet when it comes to Christ’s Holy Supper and all that he gives to us through that Supper, are we lethargic? Are we lazy? Do we take it for granted or simply go through the motions because it’s being offered in worship tonight? If that’s the case, then like the disciples and the Corinthians, we need to turn to Jesus in repentance, confessing our lazy ways before him, while recognizing what tremendous gifts our Savior has **“for you”** and me.

When Jesus says **“for you,”** that is the Great Forgiver speaking to you and connecting you to his suffering and death for you. He connects you to himself even now and gives you himself because he is the Great Forgiver of all sin. What we’re about to celebrate tonight and in the days to come is exactly what Jesus gives us in his Supper. So how will we respond?

We'll care about partaking of Christ's Holy Supper. We'll care about how we receive this Supper because it is a holy, sacred, precious treasure, but it's not something to hide somewhere where no one else can get it. Last night, the Chicago Cubs received their World Series championship rings, each of which is worth \$70,000 due to the fact that each ring has 108 diamonds in it. Reporters asked the players when they would wear their rings. Many of them said they would keep it in a safe place and maybe bring it out for special occasions. In Christ's Holy Supper, we have an even more precious treasure than a \$70,000 ring, but we don't hide it. No, we celebrate it, and celebrate it regularly and often. Why? In that Supper, Jesus gives himself **"for you."** In that Supper, Jesus forgives your sins. In that Supper, Jesus gives you new life. In that Supper, Jesus gives you communion with God and your fellow believers. In that Supper, Jesus gives you eternal salvation. What a precious, priceless treasure! Why wouldn't you want to celebrate that?

So come to the Lord's Table! He's waiting for you with a feast of forgiveness. He's waiting to give you all that he accomplished **"for you"** in that Upper Room, in that quiet Garden, in those halls of injustice, on the cross, and in the tomb. Come and fix your eyes on Jesus—the Great Forgiver! Amen.