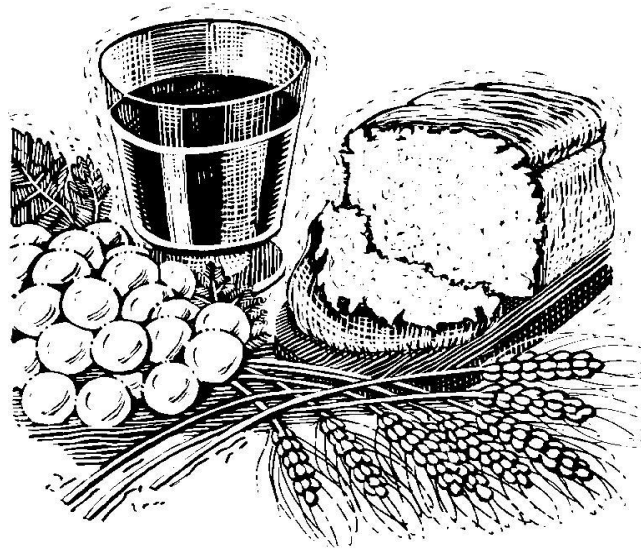




The Sacrament
of
Holy Communion

**The Reverend Pat Olausen
Pastor – Christ Lutheran Church
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On Holy Communion



During the Call Process, and in my first few weeks at Christ Lutheran, I was frequently asked about Holy Communion. And, as it happens, it is a very good time to remember and refresh ourselves with Luther's teachings, as we celebrate this gift of God with five new brothers and sisters who joined us at the Table. Recently Katie, Richard, and Rosemary joined us in receiving the Sacrament. They were followed by Alex and Brenna the following Sunday.

These children were wonderful to work with the night we met. You can be proud of them (especially their parents and Sunday School Teachers). They baked so much flatbread for Holy Communion that we will have plenty of bread for the Sacrament for the whole summer. It is hard to work with proofing the yeast and kneading the bread (but not too much) and shaping the bread (but not too much) and resisting punching it down really hard. But no matter how well prepared it is, your gracious kindness to me leads me to believe that you will also receive the gift of their hands graciously as well. Thanks to God for all of them; I really look forward to having them in Confirmation in a couple of years.

If you want to skip the rather lengthy explanation of Holy Communion and information about frequency of the Sacrament, and the age of First Holy Communion that follows, I definitely understand. But if you want to know more, I hope you will enjoy reading it.

Because I have received so many questions about the contents of the cup, I will start there:

Beginning at the beginning, I thought we could start with God's Word, the Bible: The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke speak of Jesus celebrating a last Passover meal with the disciples. And at the table, Jesus spoke words which have reverberated down the centuries to us "Do this, do this . . ." In referring to the blood of Christ, all three of these Gospels speak of Jesus' actions in this way:

- Matthew 26:27 "Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying 'Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant . . .'"
- Mark 14:23 "Then he took the cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many . . .'"
- Luke 22:17 "Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves."

In John's Gospel, Jesus does not eat a Passover meal. Instead he eats a meal with the disciples the night before. This puts the time of his crucifixion just as the Passover lambs are being sacrificed at the Temple in Jerusalem. The Lamb of God (Jesus) who comes to set us free from the enslaving power of sin and brings us eternal life, dies as the lambs for the Passover meal are killed. They are sacrificed, their blood dashed against the altar, and their bodies taken home for the Passover meal. The Passover meal has been eaten by Jews for thousands of years as a reminder of when Israel was a nation of slaves in Egypt. It commemorates a night when the angel of death passed over their homes, homes which were marked with the blood of the unblemished year-old lamb they had sacrificed. John's Gospel ties together the image of Jesus as the True Lamb of God, setting free a people (which includes us) enslaved by sin.

The synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) do not ever refer to the contents of the cup, except to call it the blood of the covenant, and calling for it to be shared. Most likely it was wine, as keeping grape juice in a hot climate was difficult. Certainly it is wine which is used at a Passover meal. But essentially wine and grape juice are the same, with the only difference being that wine is fermented grape juice. There are numerous church bodies which abolished alcohol usage several centuries ago, and who receive the cup only in grape juice. At the Lutheran Theological Seminary at

Philadelphia I learned of an area of central Pennsylvania where ONLY grape juice has been used since the colonial founding of the churches (this area is known as “the grape juice belt”). And they all have received, and continue to receive, the fullness of Holy Communion in both kinds --- both bread and cup. Jesus is not limited by fermentation or its lack. He is God, and by his promise and the gift of Holy Communion, he can be present in the contents of a cup of grape juice, or in a cup of fermented grape juice which we know as wine. Alcohol is not a necessity to carry God.

Holy Communion is central to our faith, and was *extremely* important to Martin Luther. It is, with Baptism, a means of grace, a way in which God claims us with such an abundance of love and acceptance that we cannot imagine it. We are helpless in the water of Baptism; it is God who gives us new birth and the gift of the Holy Spirit. We are only recipients, and undeserving ones at that. (And while we often think of infants as sinless, perfect beings, we only have to have responsibility for them at age two to realize that they, like us, are sinful creatures saved only by Jesus Christ.)

We are vulnerable and open to God at Holy Communion, our mouths open like little birds for the bread, our hands open for the cup, kneeling in respect at the gift of Jesus. He graces us at the Meal, which is true spiritual food and drink for our life journeys, true spiritual medicine for our sin-sick souls. We don't work to earn God's grace, we can only receive it. And Holy Communion is the most frequent form of the means of grace that sustains us Christians in our daily lives.

By the 16th century the cup had been removed from the people, and only the Celebrant (the priest celebrating Holy Communion, the “Mass”) drank from the cup. He drank “on behalf of the people.” Luther restored the cup to the people. Holy Communion, he taught, involved receiving “in both kinds,” both bread and cup. Neither was to be omitted. And in this same spirit of reformation, he restored the ancient church's practice of placing the bread in the hands of the communicants, allowing them to receive Christ's Body in their own hands. This was revolutionary, as so many people of the Middle Ages took the bread home to work “magic spells” with it that the Roman Catholic Church placed the bread directly on the tongues of recipients. Luther took the route of educating people about the true use of Holy Communion, and the right reception of it.

Now for some history in order to understand the various doctrines of various church bodies:

Martin Luther began as an Augustinian Monk, burdened with a spiritual heaviness that nearly destroyed him. God, he believed, was an angry, vengeful God, dangling people over the hell fires of purgatory. Drawn to a deeply close, lifetime study of the Bible he discovered God as a loving, forgiving God who sent Jesus, the Son, to save us. There is nothing that we can do to earn heaven (and, he discovered, there is no purgatory). We cannot ever be “good” enough. In fact, to even think that we can be good enough to be perfect, good enough to make ourselves “right” with a holy God and “earn” heaven is, in its self, a great sin.

Luther was assigned to a professorship at the new Wittenberg University in Germany. Learning through study of God’s Word, the Bible, and a life of prayer, he began to write about discrepancies between the Bible and the teachings of the Church. Fast forward a few years, and the Augustinian Monk was no longer welcomed for his role as a “Reformer” within the Church, but a marked man, excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church. He continued to teach, to preach, to challenge believers, with his theology, his understanding about God. He was not a protester, he was a reformer. When we speak of other non-Roman Catholic, non-Episcopal, and non-Lutheran congregations, we are speaking of Protestant Churches. We are a Reformation people, a re-forming people.

On the issue of the doctrine of Holy Communion it is as if the Church, in its various church bodies, stands in three different places. The Roman Catholic Church teaches the Doctrine of Transubstantiation. This Doctrine states that the bread and the contents of the cup are literally and completely transformed into the body and blood of Jesus. No trace of their earthly origin remains. The Protestant Church bodies, embracing Jesus’ words at the Last Supper to “do this in remembrance of me,” and “do this as often as you think of me” teach that Holy Communion is “a Meal of Remembrance.” The bread remains bread; the contents of the cup remain earthly elements as well.

The Lutheran Church teaches the Doctrine of Consubstantiation.” (And following along after us, the Episcopal Church as well.) The Doctrine of Consubstantiation teaches that the elements of bread and cup *are* the body and blood of Jesus Christ. He is “in, with, and under” the elements. AND, AT THE SAME TIME, the elements are *also* bread and

wine/grape juice. Just as Jesus Christ came to us as two natures (fully God, and fully man) so the bread and the contents of the cup are *both* body and blood, *and wheat and grapes*. Consubstantiation. Not Transubstantiation. And Not a Meal of Remembrance.

It has seemed to me personally that this Doctrine truly reflects the scriptures, our understanding of God, and our vision of reality. As the scriptures say: "This is my body, broken for you." And at the elevation of the cup we hear the words "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." We look, and as people of science, we know that if we chemically analyze the elements of Holy Communion we learn they are products of wheat and grapes. But through our hearts of faith, we experience these as the body and blood of Jesus. It is similar to Jesus coming to us in two natures: Fully God, Fully Man. Yet without his divinity he could not have worked miracles, and without it he could not rise from the dead. Without his humanity he could not identify with our human lives, and he could not die. We are blessed that Jesus came in two natures to be the very answer to brokenness and sin that we need. And we are blessed to remember this as we receive the Sacrament which reflects these two natures.

As for frequency: Once a week? Twice a month? Four times a year? Church leaders at the time of Luther accused him of many things concerning the Mass, including lack of frequency or complete removal. "I do not come to abolish the Mass!" he declared.

Jesus says: "Do this as often as you think of me." How often do we think of Jesus? How many times do we think on him, pray to him throughout the day? On some tough days (and some glorious ones, I cannot begin to imagine the number of times I think of him. And then, broken person that I am, the very next day I forget to remember the one who constantly remembers me and every hair on my head.)

How often does the community of God's people gather? Weekly. Semi-weekly in Lent . . . All those opportunities to gather for Word and Sacrament . . . As Lutherans, we are a people of Word and Sacrament. And yet we once lost weekly practice: when the circuit riding Colonial-era Lutheran pastors traveled among the many Lutheran churches they pastored. Holy Communion, which occurs only when an ordained person presides, occurred once a month or less. And so we lost the weekly practice for about 250 years or so. In the 1960's and 70's various Lutheran Churches began recovery of the weekly Celebration. Today there are only a very few ELCA congregations left in New Jersey that do not celebrate weekly.

Now not everyone wants the Sacrament weekly. But the availability each week presents an opportunity for those who hunger and thirst for it. No one should feel pressured in any way to receive or not to receive. And no one who feels “home” in a particular service should be reminded that if they went to another they COULD receive.

Christ Lutheran Church is full of mature and maturing Christians, I do not think anyone will be watching to see who does receive, and who doesn't. As for me, I am just broken and sinful enough that I will be receiving at each service. In Holy Communion I am awed by the presence of God, and reminded of what God has done, and continues to do for me.

I would also like to note that if bread is dropped, I will pick it up and consume it as a sign of respect for Jesus. I will also receive the cup after all common cup people and all receiving by intinction have used it, as a witness that I have never gotten ill from this practice. (Bacterial studies teach that there is a chemical reaction between wine and metal which destroys bacteria. I cannot vouch for this; maybe God just keeps me well.)

Over the past several years I have realized that the more I know about faith, the more I realize how little I know. And when I begin to think I am grasping an idea about Holy Communion, I find there is so much more. For over 20 years I thought that First Holy Communion ought to occur in fifth grade. For a few years now I have realized that I do not know any more than a fifth grader, or indeed, any one of God's children of any age. We are all beginning and renewing travelers on a great faith journey.

For so many years it has been a bitter occasion for our children, watching their second grade friends receive, while they are restricted. Don't we teach Holy Communion as a means of grace? Can we ever understand it fully? And is it not a sinful, broken thought that we have to understand what God is doing in order to receive what God has for us? I certainly think all of us should be in a place to receive the Sacrament with great respect, and to engage in a life-long faith journey with Jesus in it. And this is where second graders are.

So, beginning this November we will have First Holy Communion Instruction for children second grade and older. In Advent, as we celebrate Jesus who came long ago, and who will come again, we also celebrate Jesus coming to us now in Word and Sacrament. This makes a meaningful season to receive for the first time. (And please, parents, do not pressure your children if they do not feel ready.)

Anyone interested in baking Communion bread (gently) who wants to enjoy a morning or evening discussing the Sacrament, just tell me. I know that the more I share and study, the more I appreciate what God is doing. I am open and welcoming of your thoughts and questions; also if there are enough of us, we can arrange a study group for this fall. Perhaps you would be interested in learning more about Martin Luther and his teachings.

I want you to know that these are *pastoral concerns* for me, not practical ones such as those which are worked through the Council and Committee structure.

I have been busy meeting with some of the congregational leadership, a practice I will continue. It has been wonderful learning from them, and dreaming dreams of ways to continue to reach out with Christ, here at Christ. Truly Christ Lutheran Church has some gifted Christian leaders. I pray for God's gracious blessings to rain on Christ Church, and upon all of you,

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Pastor Pat Olausen

