

## **“Come and let’s feast!” 1Co 11:23-26 (30)**

**For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.**

**Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.**

You know that Jesus has said quite a few things which are hard to get our minds around. But perhaps nothing else has been such a stumbling block and have caused so much strife and division in the Church as these words, which we heard this evening, written by Paul the apostle.

“This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” Take and eat, this is my body! Take and drink, this is my blood!

We as Christians and Lutheran are used to these words. We can’t hear them anymore the way someone hears them for the first time. When I had just become a member of congregation in Latvia, a friend of mine, a very intelligent man, whom I highly respect, asked me:

“What is this Holy Communion about?” In my great “wisdom” of a new Christian I explained to him: “It is about eating the body of Jesus and drinking His blood”. That was the end of our conversation on that topic...

Today I would probably say that the Holy Communion is the greatest gift and mystery that Jesus Christ has given to His Church, and only when you have learned and understood what following Jesus means, you may be taught about the Holy Communion and only then invited to enjoy its gifts.

But what did those disciples on that night think about these words of Jesus? Remember, they were faithful Jews, trying to live according to God’s law. They had grown up participating in sacrificial meals. That was their worship.

And that’s why they knew very well what God had said about drinking blood. Leviticus chapter 17 is the place to go to read more about it. “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls...” and “... you shall not eat the blood of any creature... whoever eats it shall be cut off.” (Lev 17:11, 14) Harsh...

Okay, what does this mean? This is important if we want to understand and appreciate what Jesus gives us in His Supper. “The life of the flesh is in the

blood.” I guess we can relate to it. Where is our life-force that keeps us going? We could say, – in our blood. If you lose your blood, you will lose your life. That’s how people since ancient times have understood it.

Therefore, in different religious and magical rituals blood has been and still is considered as the most powerful substance, and it has been widely used in all sorts of ways hoping to gain health, strength, fertility, love, energy, and so on.

However, who is the very source of life? God the Creator is the source of all life, and by prohibiting all unauthorized manipulations with blood, He reserves for Himself all the rights to give and to take life.

Now, what was Jesus doing? Suddenly He says: “Take and drink, this is my blood”. He turns God’s prohibition from the OT upside down... because He can. He is the same God, now came as one of us.

Remember Jesus declaring elsewhere: “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.” (John 5:26) “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day...” (John 6:53F)

We won’t be able to elaborate it in details here, but as Jesus institutes the Holy Communion in the presence of His disciples, what happens is – the entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament comes to its true fulfillment, and then even something more, something mind blowing is added on top of that.

Jesus’ disciples could easily understand most of the benefits of the Holy Meal that Jesus was introducing, for they have grown up with those rituals. But one element would be shocking for them as well. Jesus’ blood. Take and drink! That was something unheard!

At that moment they most probably didn’t understand that the man who was giving them this strange new Holy Meal, was no one else, but the Son of God, who had come to give His life as the ultimate sacrifice for our sins, for mine and yours, so that His death would bring us life. New life, eternal life.

And how would He give us this new life? The same way our God keeps sustaining our physical life, – by most ordinary means of eating and drinking. Except this time, this is not an ordinary meal. Yes, it seems ordinary when you look at it with human eyes.

Bread and wine. But the ordinary appearance hides the most extraordinary of gifts. Jesus, true God and true man, has now returned to the Father, and sits at His right hand, which means – that now by His divine nature and power He can be present everywhere.

And how does Jesus use this power? To be with us, to serve us and to feed us with His life-giving body and blood in His Holy Supper. Remember, He has true life in Himself. And now “whoever feeds on [His body] and drinks [His] blood has eternal life, and [Jesus] will raise him up on the last day.”

We could say that the Lord's Supper is the finest expression of how our God comes to us, and that is why it is so scandalous. Jesus, the Son of God, came in that particular place and in that particular time and in that particular form.

Now He continues to do the same in the Holy Communion. He comes to us in this particular place, right here, and in this particular time, right now, and in this particular form, in, with and under the elements of this bread and wine. We can just exclaim: "How typical for Him!"

We could spend a long time reflecting on the mystery of the Lord's Supper, but regardless of how much we try to grasp this divine gift, it is and remains God's mystery, meaning, far beyond our ability to fully comprehend it. What we can and should know is – what it gives to us and how to receive those wonderful gifts of our God worthily.

Once Jesus' disciples grasped what Jesus had left them, they began to celebrate this meal regularly. Initially it might have even been daily, but soon it became established practice to celebrate the Holy Communion weekly.

To gather around the Lord's table on the Lord's day, when the risen Jesus Himself comes to be among us and to bless us. The early Church cherished this holy meal and they treated it with the greatest reverence. They understood Jesus' own words "Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs," (Mat 7:6) as a warning regarding the Holy Communion.

They guarded carefully so that God's most holy gifts are used only according God's own instruction and for our benefit. That's why even their services used to be divided in two parts.

During the first part everyone was heartily welcomed and encouraged to participate. That's when the Gospel of God's love and forgiveness was preached to all people, without exceptions. Bring them all in!

Second part, which begun with the words "holy things [meaning the Holy Communion] for holy people" was only for those mature disciples who knew how to receive the Communion worthily and for their blessing.

All of that makes so much sense when we reflect on what God gives us in the Holy Communion. The early Church used to call it "the medicine of the resurrection", and as every powerful medicine, as it is easy to imagine, if applied in a wrong way, it may cause more damage than good.

This is also why Paul reminds Corinthians how to receive the Communion worthily. Three simple things. First, we need to know what we receive. The very body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, given and shed for you, in, with and under the forms of bread and wine.

Thus, the bread and wine are and remain true bread and wine, but by the power of God's creative word in the Holy Communion they are also true body and true blood of the Lamb who took away our sins. Given and shed for you!

Second, we need to know why we receive them. For the forgiveness of our sins. We need to understand why Jesus has given us this gift and why we need it. Because we are sinners, and we can't live without God's grace and forgiveness.

Thus, we need to be able to examine ourselves in the light of God's will as revealed to us in the 10C. And we need to desire to lead holy lives, for the Holy Communion is God's nourishing meal that strengthens us and supports us as we try to follow our Lord in our imperfect ways.

Finally, the third thing. We need to receive this gift in the unity of faith. Not divided. Not arguing about different matters, but united in our faith. This is why Roman Catholics commune at Roman Catholic altars, and Orthodox Christians with Orthodox and Lutherans with Lutherans.

Even as all these churches teach that what we receive is indeed true body and blood of Jesus, but because of other serious disagreements in our teaching, we don't commune together, unless there are special circumstances.

And this is why the rest of Christians from all stripes of Protestant churches don't care that much were they commune, for their churches don't teach that Jesus Himself is actually present in the Holy Communion. For them it is much more about what we do and how we remember what Jesus has done. Or we could say – it is about our work and not God's gift to us.

It is important for us to remember these three. For as Paul warns us, we can receive this wonderful gift as judgment for us. If we don't understand what it is, and if we don't desire to receive it for the forgiveness of our sins, meaning, if we are unrepentant sinners and don't care about leading holy lives, or if we receive it while divided in our faith.

We are blessed and should be grateful to have received not only the accounts of what happened on the last night, when Jesus gave us the Holy Communion, but also good, clear apostolic teaching of what a precious gift it is for every Christian, and how to receive it worthily.

Anyhow, here it is, God's gift, prepared for us. For you! And the slide that we usually have on our screen as we commune reminds us about all the blessings and gifts that our gracious God delivers to you in this Holy Meal.

So, come and receive from Jesus' hand and with your mouth – forgiveness of all your sins, salvation and eternal life, come and taste that Lord is good! Come and receive His Spirit, come and be united with Jesus!

Come and be reconciled with God the Father, be strengthened in your Christian faith! Come and receive good conscience and protection against the evil one, come and experience God love in its purest form and then go in peace that surpasses all our understanding!

Come, brothers and sisters, and let's feast, as for us all these wonderful gifts are for free. Jesus has paid for them. You know how. Now, come and enjoy! Amen.