

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Holy Thursday
April 28, 2024
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
A feast for the senses and food for the soul

—1 Corinthians 10:16,17

Certain smells can trigger powerful memories. The smell of chocolate chip cookies baking can take you right back to your childhood and Mom's kitchen. If you've lived in Arizona for any amount of time you might have powerful memories of the smell of the desert after a rain. Or if you've lived on the coast, it might be the salty smell of the ocean air.

We have five senses. The sense of smell is just one of the powerful gifts the Lord gave us when he created us that permits us to experience the world around us and to recall memories from the past. We are sensory creatures. God made us that way, and when God interacts with us he engages our senses, and as he does that he feeds our soul. Jesus' gift of Holy Communion is just that: A feast for the senses and food for the soul.

It was on this night, the Thursday of Holy Week, that Jesus gathered with his disciples to eat the Passover meal. The Passover was one of the high festivals of the Jewish year. Every year the Jews gathered to slaughter a one-year-old lamb. The meat was roasted over an open fire. It was eaten with bitter herbs and unleavened bread. In Jesus' day wine was typically part of the meal. The feast recalled God's deliverance from slavery in Egypt. On this night, as Jesus met with his disciples, that had happened almost 1,500 years earlier, but the Jews still gathered to recall God's powerful salvation from slavery.

The Passover meant deliverance. The Passover meant freedom. The Passover meant grace because it was only God's unfailing love that had rescued the stiff-necked and rebellious nation of Israel from slavery. The Passover was at the very heart of what it meant to be a member of God's people. It was not for everyone. It was reserved only for the circumcised, for those who were part of God's covenant. But the Passover not only looked back to deliverance from Egypt. It looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, to the final deliverance, not from slavery to an earthly power but deliverance from slavery to powers not of this world: slavery to sin, to death, to Satan, and to hell.

Picture that scene in the upper room—the rabbi with his disciples. It was close and convivial, an intimate setting and a very personal moment. The men reclined around the table. Jesus said, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you." Jesus knew what the next few hours would bring. In just a few hours one of the men at that Passover feast would betray him to Jesus' enemies. There was a reason the Lord chose this night, this Passover, to institute a new covenant with his disciples. The old covenant, given by Moses, was about to be fulfilled. The Messiah, the ultimate deliverer, was here! Jesus knew that in just a few hours he would be hanging from a Roman cross. He himself would be sacrificed as the Passover Lamb for deliverance. His holy, precious blood would be poured out for the salvation of the world.

So our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night in which he was betrayed, took bread. Then he broke it, gave thanks, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat. This is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." Then he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This blood is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." From that first Holy Thursday when Communion was instituted, Christians have gathered regularly and often to partake of the same special meal Jesus served to his first disciples on the night he was betrayed.

A couple decades later, the Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Christian congregation in the Greek city of Corinth. The Corinthians were getting careless with their Communion practices, so Paul needed to teach them some important things; he does that here in chapter 10 and in chapter 11. He says, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a communion of the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a communion of the body of Christ?" The apostle explains exactly what Jesus meant when he said, "This is my body, this is my blood." Jesus didn't say, "This *symbolizes* my body, this *symbolizes* my blood." He didn't say, "This *has changed into* my body, this *has changed into* my blood." Those are false teachings that developed long after Jesus spoke the words, and they have distorted the last will and testament of Jesus. No, *is* means *is*. The Apostle says that there is a *communion* between the bread we eat and the wine we consume. A communion is a "common union" or a oneness. What we consume is still bread and wine, but in communion with the bread and the wine—or as we like to say, "in, with, and under the bread and the wine," Jesus gives us his true body and blood.

But why is Holy Communion such an important blessing? After all, we can come to church and hear the good news of our forgiveness, can't we? Of course we can! But God is not stingy, and we are sensory creatures! Holy Communion is a feast for the senses. We see held before our eyes the very body of Christ given for us on the cross and raised from the dead on the third day. We hear the words of Christ spoken—the very words he said to his disciples on the night he was betrayed: "This is my body, this is my blood." We touch with our hands and our lips and our tongue the body and blood that was given and poured out for us. We experience the smell and the taste of the elements, as they are placed on our lips. We receive Jesus into ourselves, and in a very tangible way he becomes part of us, just as we are part of him.

You know how it works: If you love someone, and you really, really want that person to know how much you love them, what do you do? Are you going to be like the pathetic husband, who when his wife asked him, "Do you love me?" replied, "I married you, didn't I?" (Sad but true story!) No, if you love someone, and that person is precious and dear to you, you're going to pull out all the stops. You're going to do everything you can to make sure that person knows how special they are to you and how much you love them. Gifts, deeds of kindness, loving words, spending time—you're going to go to great lengths to know how special they are to you. So it is with God. He doesn't just tell you over and over again that he loves you and forgives you. In this feast for the senses called Holy Communion, God gives us a multi-sensory experience of the depth of his love for us.

And like the disciples with their rabbi in the upper room, we eat and drink the Lord's Supper in the company of our fellow believers in Jesus. We come into church from all our struggles in the world. We are assaulted on all sides by worldly pressures, devilish temptations, by people who have other beliefs and other values, but here we are gathered around Christ. We are one in Christ. Our faith in Jesus is the same. Our teaching is the same. Our belief in his sacrament is the same. We all eat of the same bread and drink of the same wine. As Paul says, "Because there is one bread, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." In this Communion there is not only oneness between the bread and the body of Christ and between the wine and the blood of Christ; there is also oneness among those who commune together. We are one in faith, one in confession, one in Christ. We enjoy this feast for the senses in intimate communion with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

But it gets better, because Communion is not only a sensory experience, it's also food for the soul. When we commune with him, Jesus says, "This is my body given for *you*. This is my blood poured out for *you* for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus died for every last man, woman, and child on earth; he loves and died for them all. But in this sacred meal Jesus comes to *you*. Just to *you*. Personally, one-on-one, and he feeds *you*. This body and blood sacrificed once on the cross was sacrificed for *you*, for the forgiveness of *your* sins and the strengthening of *your* faith. All the gifts that Jesus won for the world on Calvary are given to you, as you taste, as you see, as you hear, all the things Jesus did for *you*.

Tonight we celebrate Holy Communion, as we and Christians before have been doing for nearly 2,000 years. As you approach the Lord's table tonight, bring your sins and leave them there. Bring your guilt and shame and leave it. Bring your sorrows, your burdens, your cares, your worries, your anxieties, your stress—and leave them. Come to commune with your brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, and come to commune with the one who says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." Come to the table, and receive Jesus. Receive his true body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins and for the strengthening of your faith. Then depart in peace in the freedom of forgiveness to live a new and holy life, devoted to serving him. Depart in peace with your burdens lifted, your cares and anxieties assuaged, your sins forgiven.

Come to the feast and enjoy the banquet with Jesus! It's a feast for the senses and food for the soul. Amen.