**Divine Service Part III**

Trinity XVII 10.4.2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Our last two “sermons” on the Divine Service were more like abbreviated Bible Studies that true sermons. To be fair, I have been doing this for a dual purpose, to give people the idea that Bible Study might be enjoyable (and they might want to join), and because God’s children need to understand the great benefit and gifts given in the Divine Service.

Today we will conclude our study of the Divine Service. This week we examine the pinnacle, the highlight of our gathering as God’s children, the Service of the Sacrament, the third part of the Divine Service.

If I were to ask what is the most visible evidence of Christ’s presence in our midst this morning, what would you say that it is? Is it the cross? How about the stained glass? A statue of Jesus? No! No! No!

Maybe it would help if I asked it in this way, “Is Christ physically present in any way or form this morning?”

His body and His blood will soon be on our altar – not a symbol of Christ, not a representation of Christ – the very body of Christ which was pierced for you, and the very precious and holy blood of Christ shed for you. You will see, touch, taste, eat, and drink – Christ. This is the greatest manifest visitation of God to His people.

On that first Easter, a couple disciples walked with Jesus to Emmaus, but they did not recognize Him as He was talking with them on the road. But, when they got to their destination and they sat down for a meal, they finally recognized Him in the breaking of the bread.

Dear friends, the vital importance of this meal is shown to us in the Book of Acts. In a number of places, we learn these early Christians celebrated the Breaking of the Bread – the Lord’s Supper – on every first day of every week.

In our Lutheran Confessions, the book which our congregational constitution says is the rule and norm of our Christian faith and life, says that in Luther’s day they celebrated the Lord’s Supper on every Lord’s day, that is, every first day of the week.

Christ’s body, Christ’s blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Can it be meaningless? Could we take it too often? Can ***we*** make it impotent so that it loses all power? Of course not! Whether we believe it to be the True Body and True Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ – it is. It is those things and it truly gives forgiveness to those who believe.

We can however take it to our judgment if we do not know what we are doing, or if we do it carelessly and thoughtlessly. However, this is not a problem with the Lord’s Supper – it is not a problem with what Christ is giving and doing in His Supper. At that point, it would be a problem with us.

Let us examine the Service of the Sacrament. Standing in reverence to our holy and gracious God, at the end of the “Prayer of the Church,” the service continues with the Preface. Again, the pastor greets the people with God’s Word. At his speaking the reality happens, “the Lord be with you.” Again, God’s people respond and speak the reality back upon their shepherd, “and with thy Sprit,” and only as the Spirit is upon us, do we lift up our hearts and give thanks to God. We give thanks to God by singing the Sanctus, proclaiming by those words what is true about God – that He is holy – and that He comes to us.

Proclaiming and knowing the gracious nature of God, His willingness to come to us and give us His merciful gifts, we pray our table prayer, the very prayer that Jesus gave us to pray. Yes, the Lord’s Prayer is our communion table prayer – it begins with words showing our unity to one another as one family – “Our Father”. We could talk about this prayer, but there is a whole Lenten series wrapped up in this short prayer. Maybe I should use it again as a Lenten series.

Following this prayer, the pastor repeats the very words of Christ when He first instituted this supper. Christ’s own words bring about the very reality they declare – His body is now present; His blood is now present – they are before us that we might eat and that we might drink. They are before us that we might eat and drink for the forgiveness of sins. They are before us that Christ might come to us in the most intimate way possible.

In reverence to Christ’s presence, that He has now sacramentally united His very flesh to this bread, on our altar, the pastor may genuflect after speaking this Word of Christ. Again, in reverence to Christ’s presence, that He has not sacramentally united His very blood to this wine, on our altar, the pastor may genuflect after speaking this Word of Christ.

This is also why after the consecration, the pastor holds up the host and the chalice before his face and faces the congregation and proclaims, “the peace of the Lord be with you.” It is not the pastor’s peace you are receiving, it is Christ. It is Christ’s body in the pastor’s hand! It is Christ’s blood in the chalice! It is Christ’s Word issuing from the pastor’s lips.

It is Christ who fills you with His peace! Christ comes with forgiveness! It is Christ who keeps you in all trials and tribulations of this life. It is Christ who fills you with Himself and removes the terror of sin.

Knowing Christ is coming to you, you beg of Him mercy, recognizing Him in this meal. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world – the Lamb of God who takes away your sin. God’s Christ who has died for you is now coming to feed you and nourish you.

And yet, you are not alone. You are gathered at the table with those who believe as you do, even as you confessed in the first two words of the table prayer – there is a unity at this table that is closer than any other. Those who believe differently, those who do not understand, those who deny certain truths are not united with us, and so, they do not belong at this table.

Neither do those who do not believe that they need forgiveness, especially those who deny that what God calls sin, is sin. Their impenitence makes a mockery of Christ’s sacrifice, and poisons this meal.

Knowing what we are receiving, and that we are gathered with our closest family members, our blood-bought family, it is then that we eat and drink. This is ***the most*** holy meal. This food was purchased at the greatest expense, not with gold or silver, but with the holy precious blood and the innocent suffering and death of Gods Christ. Amen!

This eating and drinking is the highlight of the entire service. This is food that nourishes body and soul, for we are redeemed by Christ to join Him for eternity in His kingdom in glorified flesh. So, this meal preserves and strengthens us in body and soul, keeping us in the true faith until that day. Having communed upon Christ, we can depart in peace – we are prepared now to even depart this mortal coil in peace!

That is why we sing the words Simeon sang in the temple after holding the infant Christ; Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

For this most incredible gift, for receiving from God’s own hand the very body and blood of His own Son for our forgiveness, we give Him most hearty thanks. This meal strengthens us not only in faith toward God, but it strengthens us in forgiveness – so that we might love one another even as He has loved us.

But God is not finished with us yet. He desires to give us one last blessing before we leave His house.

Again, for the third time, pastor and congregation bless one another. The Lord be with you – and with thy spirit. Bless we the Lord – thanks be to God! We have God with us, His Spirit fills us, so we bless and thank our holy God for the incredibly merciful gifts that He has showered down upon us.

But there is one last thing to happen in the service. It is not from us to God, but ***it is*** from God to us. One last time He comes to us, ***and*** gives us the same blessing that He has given His church for countless generations. We use these words, as God **COMMANDED** this blessing to be spoken.

 In Numbers 6, God gave this blessing to Moses. *The Lord spoke to Moses saying, "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, "thus you shall bless the sons of Israel. You shall say to them: The Lord bless you and keep you; The Lord make His face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; The Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace. So shall they invoke My name on the sons of Israel, and I will bless them."* A man speaks as He was commanded to speak by God, and God puts His name upon you, claiming you as His own. You have done – and you do – nothing. It is God who works.

As God’s Word is spoken by God’s chosen instrument, His pastors, He blesses you, keeps you, makes His face to shine upon you, is gracious to you, and gives you peace.

God’s name begins the service. God’s name ends the service. God continually blesses, bestowing countless gifts in the service – it is therefore His service. It is not our service, it is His. We are the invited guests who are given His name, called by His name, gathered by His name, commune upon His flesh and blood, and are blessed in His name.

Until we join in the eternal heavenly banquet feast, we join Christ in this feast that He sets before us. Let us rejoice and be glad that He Himself comes to us, and cares for us in such an intimate way. Amen.