

March 22

Real Presence - Not Cannibalism

An old seminary professor of mine once said in class regarding reception of communion, "If I couldn't be Lutheran, I'd probably be Roman Catholic. At least there you get *something* in the sacrament."

His point was that receiving just a picture of Jesus (for some that is all there is in communion), is not quite as potent or memorable as receiving a more substantial presence. Many people know that the Roman Catholic Church rings bells at the point of the consecration of the elements, and that they believe "transubstantiation" occurs at that moment. The elements are changed from bread to the body of Christ, and from wine to the blood of Christ. The earthly elements are gone. Only Christ is present. That is something! Though it is not quite what Lutherans believe.

One of the reasons for using earthly elements, at all, is to remind us that we are not in heaven yet! The earthly elements (bread and wine) combined with the heavenly elements (the body and blood of Christ), remind us of our duality: 1 foot on earth and the foot of faith in heaven. When we get to Heaven, the feast will change. Heaven will joyfully lack the need of forgiveness. We will be "**blameless**." (Jude 24). "**Remembrance**" will not be necessary. We will be "**with the Lord!**" That feast will be a marriage feast of the resurrected saints (Rev. 19:9).

But the feast of the sacrament here on earth is a feast - *on the earth* - dealing with earthly burdens such as sin, weak faith, pains of life, relational struggles. Christ gives us *in, with, and under* the earthly bread and wine, His divine food for divine strength. But, even the divine elements are *earthy*: body, blood!!

John does not have the Lord's Supper instituted as the other three Gospels do during Holy Week. But John adds a section following the feeding of the 5000 which sounds like Holy Communion – yet it's different. Jesus says, "**I Am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread also which I shall give for the life of the world is My flesh... He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.**" (John 6:51, 56)

Certainly, these words are challenging to understand. In fact, that was the response of the crowds: "When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?'... After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with Him...." (John 6:60 & 66)

The difficult words in John 6 are primarily about "eating righteousness" (Matthew 5:6) which happens through *faith*. "*Truly, truly, I say to you whoever **believes** has eternal life. I am the bread of life.*" (John 6:47, 48). If we "*hunger and thirst for righteousness,*" the only full "*satisfaction*" and righteousness we will ever receive is by believing in or completely consuming Christ by faith. (Matthew 5:6)

The Lutheran Confessions mention the disciples in Capernaum who left Jesus because of the misunderstanding of cannibalism. When the Reformers speak of receiving Holy Communion, they write: "*We believe, teach, and confess that Christ's body and blood are received with the bread and the wine, not only spiritually through faith, but orally. Yet not in a 'Capernaite' way, but in a supernatural, heavenly way, because of the sacramental union.*" (Formula, Epitome VII). So, Christ comes in the sacrament "supernaturally" (above nature) and we "often" commune. We hunger for the foretaste of the feast to come. Completely satisfied by faith in Christ now, hungry for comfort in every Communion, and longing for the "marriage feast" of full, lasting, present joy to come!

Prayer: *Lord, satisfy me fully by faith in You. Come to me in the Eucharist, I am burdened. And "Come, Lord Jesus" soon, so that the endless feast of joy and life can begin! Bless our faith as we feast! Amen.*