

April 13, 2017

“Who, then, receives this sacrament worthily?”



Some of us Lutherans have a regular anxiety when it comes to Holy Communion. Am I worthy enough to receive Holy Communion? Am I prepared enough to participate in the Sacrament of the Altar? Have I done enough to deserve to come for the Lord's Supper? Let me resolve those questions for you. The answer is "No." No, you are not worthy enough. No, you are not prepared enough. No, you have not done enough.

Fortunately for you and me, the Sacrament of the Altar is something God does for us. It is not something we do for God. Our actions cannot get our ticket punched so that we qualify for God's gracious gifts. The good news is that God does not benefit the qualified. God qualifies us for the benefits.

The first gift of the Holy Spirit is the gift of faith. This is the capacity to trust that God will give us all that we need when we need it. Remember the challenge of the First Commandment. We are to fear, love and trust God above all things. But, of course, this is precisely what sinners cannot do. In the Apostles' Creed we confess that we cannot by our own understanding and strength believe in Jesus Christ, our Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called us through the Gospel.

In the Lord's Supper, God makes good on this promise. We pray that the Holy Spirit will create in us the faith which alone makes us worthy to participate in the Sacrament of the Altar. The Holy Spirit equips us to trust in those marvelous words, "given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." On our own we simply cannot muster up the trust to embrace those words. So the Holy Spirit fills us with that faith, if we will be open to that gift.

So what about preparation for Holy Communion? Luther takes this into account. "Fasting and bodily preparation is, indeed, a fine outward training," Luther writes. In the Large Catechism he reminds us that even our anxiety about preparation and worthiness is valuable. When we worry about such things, this is a sign that the Holy Spirit is working on us to receive the Sacrament with believing hearts. The real danger in the Sacrament is a heart that is cold and uncaring.

It is the time of year when the gardeners among us are getting very busy. A gardener will tell you how important it is to prepare the soil for the seeds. And that gardener will tell you how much work goes into that preparation. But that gardener will also tell you that no one can make those seeds grow. Preparation can create better conditions to receive the benefits of the garden, but preparation can never produce the growth. So it is with the Sacrament of the Altar. Preparation can be of great help to deepen our appreciation of Holy Communion. But it cannot make us worthy to receive it.

So please spend time during the week reflecting on God's gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation. Take some time on the day before worship to pray for the Holy Spirit's gift of faith. Continue those prayers before worship begins. Then relax and receive. Holy Communion is not something we do for God. Holy Communion is something God does for us.

Let's pray. Dear God, give me the power of your Holy Spirit that creates in me the faith which alone makes me worthy to participate. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Do something: Read the prayers in the front of our hymnal for Holy Communion. Pray those prayers before worship.

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