

April 12, 2017



“How can bodily eating and drinking do such a great thing?”

“Given, and shed for you, for the remission of sins... [these] words are, beside the bodily eating and drinking, as the chief thing in the Sacrament; and he that believes these words has what they say and express, namely, the forgiveness of sins.”

When I was in seminary, we Lutherans were beginning to grapple with the rise of the so-called “evangelical” traditions in North American Christianity. A few of my classmates brought with them a variety of expressive, emotional and enthusiastic experiences of the Christian faith and life. They urged the rest of us to develop a relationship with Jesus as our “personal” Lord and Savior. That was not comfortable for the majority of us, both experientially and theologically. But we did our best to listen and learn.

One day in our worship and liturgy class, one of my more “evangelical” classmates asked a very earnest question. “Why,” he pondered, “why don’t Lutherans have ‘altar calls’ during our worship services? What if someone wants to come forward and make a commitment to Jesus right there on the spot?” Our professor was hospitable to the idea. If someone did get up and make such a confession, the pastor would certainly invite the newly-converted person into deeper conversation and a consideration of baptism.

That’s wasn’t quite dramatic enough for my classmate, but he was willing to let the matter rest at that moment. Not so much for our dear professor. “However,” he continued, “I don’t agree with the assertion that Lutherans do not have altar calls in our worship services. In fact we have an altar call every Sunday. We name that altar call ‘Holy Communion.’” My classmate was even less satisfied with that answer. But it reminded me of the heart of Luther’s words about the Sacrament of the Altar.

Come to the altar, we call out in our worship. Come prepared to meet Jesus personally. After all, how much more personal can you get than to receive Jesus’ body and blood? Luther emphasizes this in his explanation in the Small Catechism. There are two chief parts of receiving the sacrament. There is the personal eating and drinking, filled with faith by the Holy Spirit. And there is the trusting embrace of those words--“given and shed FOR YOU...”

Come to the altar, we call out in our worship. Come prepared to meet Jesus personally. And come ready to embrace the gift that is given for and to you--personally. We don’t baptize whole crowds with a fire hose. We don’t shovel out the bread willy nilly. This is indeed our Lutheran “altar call.” This is indeed a “personal” relationship with Jesus as Lord and Savior. And it’s so important that we answer the call week in and week out to receive forgiveness, life and salvation.

So Holy Communion is a very “evangelical” sacrament. The word “evangelical” actually means “rooted in the good news of Jesus.” That good news is FOR YOU. Take those words to heart every week.

Let’s pray. Dear God, give me the power of your Holy Spirit that creates in me the faith to hear those words “given and shed for you” as “given and shed for me.” In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Do something: Think about your family, friends and neighbors who are not part of a church family. Invite one of them to worship during Holy Week and/or the Easter season.

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