

SERMON
 First Lutheran Church
 Aitkin, Minnesota
 August 27, 2017

Psalm 65
 1 Corinthians 11:17-34
 Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen

ADULT MESSAGE

It was during my first year as a pastor. I was visiting in the home of a woman in my parish. She confided that her daughter had gone off to New York City and become a **prostitute**. I listened to her painful story, expressed my sorrow and support and together we prayed for her daughter. **“At least she’s coming home for Christmas,”** she told me.

Christmas Eve worship service came, and there in the sanctuary I spotted my parishioner and a young woman sitting next to her. **“I’m glad her daughter made it home for Christmas,”** I thought to myself. The service went on and it came time for Holy Communion. Row by row the people filed forward and knelt at the altar rail. Back and forth I went, starting at one end and moving to the other. Then all of a sudden, I spotted my parishioner and her daughter kneeling together at the far end. Through this brand new pastor’s mind raced the thought, **“What am I going to do? She is a prostitute. I can’t give her communion. . .”**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, welcome to this **great family reunion banquet** here at First Lutheran Church in Aitkin, Minnesota!

The ancient psalmist wrote, **“Praise is due to you, O God. . . Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts. We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, your holy temple. . . You are the hope of all the ends of the earth. . .”** (Psalm 65:1a, 4) I say again, **“Welcome to this great family reunion banquet!”**

The psalmist tells us, the mountains, the seas, the morning, the evening, the water, the grain, the garden, the pastures, the valleys and streams – all are gifts from God for our use and care. (Psalm 65:6-13)

I **see God's handiwork** when I sit quietly in my deer stand. I **witness God's artistry** when I drive by the lakes. I **revel in God's creative spirit** when I mow my lawn and gaze at the flowers, anthills, and birds. The whole creation praises God's amazing gift. I can see God's might and ability in the world around me. **However**, there, in those amazing places, **I cannot see how God feels about me.** I can see God's masterwork. However, **I cannot see how God feels about me.**

Here at this table, I can **hear and see** how God feels about me. "**This is my blood shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin.**" Here at this table I can **touch** God's love with my hand and **put it into my mouth and heart.** "**This is my body given for you.**" Blood shed, body given, for you and for all – **God loves us more than we could ever imagine.** **That is how God feels about us!**

Our **Roman Catholic** sisters and brothers in Christ think the service starts out with bread and wine, which is then changed into the body and blood of Christ. Our **Baptist** sisters and brothers in Christ believe the service starts out with bread and grape juice and that's all it ever is. For **Lutherans**, the Lord's Supper starts with God's **good earthy gifts of bread and wine**, which by God's work become **also** the **Body and Blood of Jesus** given and shed for you, me and for all people. Holy Communion is not just a ritual. It is not a removal from our earthly lives. Holy Communion is Jesus using good earthy stuff, bread and wine, and his own Body and Blood **to save us.** It is the **life-giving meal** where Jesus himself waits on the table, is the meal, enters into our very hearts and bodies, and then goes home with us when we leave. It is food for welcome, forgiveness, healing, restoration, renewal and for power to live each day to the fullest. It is food for the **week** and for all of **eternity.** "**Take and eat,**" Jesus said, "**this is my body given for you.**"

Welcome to the great family reunion banquet! You have a great big hole right in the center of your heart and life. It is a God-shaped hole that only God can fill. We can spend all of our days pouring money, food, sex, alcohol, drugs, job, sports, **even family** into that hole and we will **never be satisfied.** We were created to live out our lives in a **love/trust relationship with God.** **If we are not there, we will never be happy.** The Psalmist said, "**Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts.**

- **“Happy?”** When we know God listens to our prayers, forgives our sins and loves us to the core, we are **set free to live joyful lives.**
- **“You Choose?”** You showing up in the house of the Lord is because **God has chosen** you to be a **child of God**, a **brother or sister to all of us.**
- **“Bring Near?”** God starts by bringing us **near to God** and then goes on to bring us **near to each other.** **God is doing that here today.**

God longs to bring each and all of us together with God and each other, here in this place. Paul, three times, used the phrase, **“coming together as a church”** with the early Christians in Corinth. He needed to correct their sharing of Holy Communion. He said, **“For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord.”** Some people think Paul meant people need to be **good enough** to receive communion. The Corinthian Christians thought they were **“super Christians.”** They believed all that mattered was that they be in a faith relationship – me and Jesus. . . They didn’t care about the neighbor or the world. The people of substance would gather and literally hold drunken orgies. Then when the time for worship arrived and the poor people came, there wouldn’t even be wine left for Holy Communion. Paul **wasn’t critical of sinners having communion.** Paul **was critical of God’s people treating Christ’s sacrificial meal** as if it were **nothing but an empty ritual.** Paul was concerned that they were showing **“contempt for the church of God and humiliating those who have nothing.”**

Those early Corinthian Christians called their gatherings for Holy Communion, **“Agape Feasts.”** **“Agape”** is the Greek word representing the **highest form** of love. The **lowest form**, **“Eros,”** refers to **physical love** – “I love fishing. I love chicken. I love sexual intercourse.” **Next, “Philos,”** refers to **mutual love** – “I scratch your back and you scratch mine. You help me and I’ll help you. Brotherly love.” **Finally, “Agape,”** speaks of **self-sacrificial, undeserved love** – Jesus loved us enough to die for us. Love your enemy.” Agape is the kind of love where you care for the wellbeing of the other, even if they shout, **“Crucify him!”** Jesus died to bring God’s love and forgiveness to every sinner. Now these Corinthians were

turning his meal from: **Welcome into rejection, Unity into division, Forgiveness into judgment, Love into hate.**

Consider whom Jesus welcomed to Holy Communion on that first Maundy Thursday. **Judas** betrayed Jesus. **Peter** denied Jesus. **Everyone else** but John abandoned Jesus in his hour of greatest need. **Jesus knew** they were going to be doing these things and still gave them communion. **Jesus knew** about their past jealousy, selfishness, lust for power, lack of faith and still welcomed them to his **table of love, forgiveness and life.** Maybe there's room for you and me here too.

Our sin saps our life and growth. God forgives, renews and gives abundant life and harvest to us when we seek God's forgiveness. Those Corinthians were taking the Lord's Supper for granted. They were making a mockery of it. They were sharing a too-human meal where **some were not welcome/wanted,** rather than **God's sacrificial meal for any and all people.** In the Lord's Supper:

- God welcomes all sinners.
- God is the host and we are the undeserving guests.
- We need God's meal – all of us and each of us.
- God gives Godself as the meal.

God invites us to share communion with God, each other and every other hungry sinner who also has a **big God-shaped hole to fill** in their lives. Thanks be to God. It was Christmas Eve. I spotted my parishioner and her prostitute daughter kneeling together at the far end of the altar rail. **“What am I going to do? She is a prostitute. I can't give her communion. . .”**

Somewhere along the altar rail, God hit me in the head with a 2x4 and I realized. **“This is what this meal is all about. This meal is for sinners. This meal is for this prostitute who has come home for Christmas.”** That night, the **pastor needed forgiveness more** than the prostitute did. That night, **she needed God's loving embrace** more than I did. And **Jesus welcomed, loved and fed us both.** Today we are gathered around the Table of the Lord once more. The Psalmist said, **“Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your court, (O Lord.) You are the hope of all the ends of the earth.”** **Here we are, Lord.** Amen.