

Medicine for the Soul
Wednesday, March 24, 2010
1 Corinthians 11:22-27; Large Catechism 467:4-9

Years ago, I came across a really funny book titled "Scandinavian Humor and Other Myths." Two grumpy old ladies graced the cover; and inside were all sorts of revelations about my Swedish upbringing. For example: no, my mom wasn't trying to punish me by serving meatballs and mashed potatoes in cream gravy, with a side of creamed corn, and lemon Jell-o or vanilla pudding with a glass of milk for dessert. Au contraire, this was a perfect example of the Scandinavian White Dish Supper, rivaled only by old-fashioned hospital food for blandness. I might have been one of the few kids in Skokie to actually lobby for green vegetables on my plate - if only for color contrast. Of course, the next night my mom actually did serve some green peas - in white sauce! Sometimes you just can't overcome your heritage!

I digress. One chapter, titled "Fifty Reasons to Not Take Communion," featured contributions from confirmation students, like: *What if there's a piece of toilet paper stuck to my shoe and everybody sees it when I kneel at the Communion rail? What if I'm thinking about last night's date instead of about Jesus? What if I am thinking about Jesus and I'm so happy that I start smiling on the way back to my pew and everybody thinks I'm thinking about last night's date?*

On a more serious note, they listed some other reasons. *What if I don't feel worthy? What if I don't feel very devout? What if I'm not aware of any pressing sins - do I still need to go? What if I've done something so bad that I think I should stay away? What if I take it so often that it no longer seems special? What if I take it so often that people think I'm trying to be Catholic?*

I bet that hits closer to home! Communion is something that we all struggle to comprehend and appreciate rightly. Many of us grew up with an understanding of Communion that focused on the forgiveness of sins it offered, and on rightly preparing to receive our Lord in the Sacrament. We take seriously St. Paul's admonition to the church in Corinth - that those who do not rightly perceive the Body of Christ in Communion, eat and drink to their own damnation.

Many of us grew up in churches where Communion was celebrated monthly or even quarterly; one had to register one's intention to receive Communion, or at least fill out a Communion card so that reception of the Sacrament could be recorded. Communion was a serious, special event; it involved personal preparation, a revised order of worship, extra work for the Altar Guild, special assistants - often limited to members of council - and a longer service. I suspect many Lutherans brought up in such a religious culture experienced serious reservations about the trend towards weekly Communion!

A lot of us *also* base our attitude toward how often we receive Communion on how we feel: about ourselves, our sinfulness, our warmth of affection for Jesus, and our personal understanding of communion. Some of the reasoning those Confirmation students used lives in us.

Do I feel particularly sinful? If so, shouldn't I be ashamed to come for Communion? In fact, don't I feel funny about even showing up in church? How many people (in the midst of a divorce or other painful and semi-public trauma) simply stay away from church completely?

Do I not feel particularly sinful? If that's the case, why do I need to take Communion? In fact, why do we have to confess our sins every single week, when we don't feel that we've done anything worth noting? Is God really gonna send us to hell because we didn't color inside the lines?! How many people drop out of church because they think it's too focused on sin; too judgmental; too legalistic? They may stay away completely, or they may attend a more upbeat, affirming, positive-thinking congregation.

What if I'm just tired, distracted, and feel like I'm going through the motions of worship? I'm certainly not going to get anything out of communion then, am I? In fact, wouldn't it be disrespectful to our Lord to just come up, take Communion, and go back to the pew feeling like all that's happened is "blah blah blah, the bread's kind of dry today, ick

the wine is yucky, gee my feet hurt, I want to get home and relax, let's get this over with?"

What's the minimum number of times I have to receive Communion to still be a member in good standing? Boy, isn't that a common sort of question in life: what's the least I have to do in order to get a passing grade; not get dumped from the team; not get yelled at by my parents, spouse, or pastor?!

And if you have never once felt at least one of these mental reservations, you're a far better Christian than I!

It was refreshing to read through the Large Catechism and discover that Luther himself had to address these concerns. His responses are helpful, timely, and occasionally pretty funny. First, he speaks to those who become lax because they no longer are compelled by the Church to receive Communion some minimum number of times - and who even feel that since they now live in Gospel freedom, they aren't obliged to observe commandments and rituals. He writes:

Those who want to be Christians should prepare themselves to receive this blessed sacrament frequently. For we see that people are becoming lax and lazy about its observance, as if they were such strong Christians that they have no need of it. Others let themselves be kept and deterred from it because we have taught that none should go unless they feel a hunger and thirst impelling them to it. Still others pretend that it is a matter of liberty,

not of necessity, and that it is enough if they simply believe. *It must be understood that such people who abstain and absent themselves from the sacrament over a long period of time are not to be considered Christians.* For Christ did not institute the sacrament for us to treat it as a spectacle, but commanded his Christians to eat and drink and thereby remember him. I call it despising when people, with nothing to hinder them, let a long time elapse without ever desiring the sacrament. *If you want such liberty, you may just as well take the further liberty not to be a Christian;* then you need not believe or pray, for the one is just as much Christ's commandment as the other. Such a commandment should move you to examine yourself and think: "What sort of Christian am I? If I were one, I would surely have at least a little desire to do what my Lord has commanded me to do."

Leave it to Luther to speak his mind and not mince words! Still, today many Lutherans, especially those who gravitate towards the "community Protestant church" end of the Christian spectrum, wonder if we make too much of a ritual, relying too much on what apparently is a human work rather than upon the interior response of pure faith in our Savior. I like what Luther said elsewhere about Baptism: the *Word* is given so that our *souls* may be saved; it is attached to the water - or in this case, the bread and wine - so that our *bodies* may also be saved. For all our bodies can actually *receive* is the water or bread or wine; but since our souls and bodies are inextricably connected, as our soul feeds on the Word, our bodies come along for the ride by "latching

onto the physical element." *We need the physical sacrament because our physical bodies believe, too - in a manner proper to bodies!*

But Luther also addressed those who felt beaten down and fearful because they clearly perceived their own unworthiness.

If you choose to fix your eye on how good and pure you are, to wait until nothing torments you, you will never go. As St. Hilary has also said, "Unless a person has committed such a sin that he has to be expelled from the congregation and has forfeited the name of Christian, he should not exclude himself from the sacrament," lest he deprive himself of life. *It is the highest art to realize that this sacrament does not depend upon our worthiness.* For we are not baptized because we are worthy and holy, nor do we come to confession as if we were pure and without sin; on the contrary, we come as poor, miserable people, precisely because we are unworthy.

In the second place, a promise is attached to the commandment: *This is my body, given for you, this is my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.* These words are not preached to wood or stone but to you and me; otherwise he might just as well have kept quiet and not instituted a sacrament. For in this sacrament he offers us all the treasures he brought from heaven for us. We must never regard the sacrament as a harmful thing from which we should flee, but as a pure, wholesome, soothing medicine that aids you and gives life in both soul and body. *Why, then, do we act as if the sacrament were a poison that would kill us if we ate of it?*

Those who despise the sacrament and lead unchristian lives receive it to their harm and damnation. But those who feel their weakness, who are

anxious to be rid of it and desire help, *should regard and use the sacrament as a precious antidote against the poison in their systems.* For in the sacrament you receive from Christ's lips the forgiveness of sins, which contains God's grace and Spirit with all his gifts, protection, defense, and power against death, the devil, and every trouble. For he himself says, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." If you are burdened and feel your weakness, go joyfully to the sacrament and let yourself be refreshed, comforted, and strengthened. *For if you wait until you are rid of your burden in order to come to the sacrament purely and worthily, you will have to stay away from it forever.*

Many in the early also referred to Holy Communion as wholesome medicine. St. Ignatius of Antioch, in the second century, called it the "medicine of immortality." Today we might use the metaphor of transplant surgery. In Holy Baptism, we receive a new heart from Jesus - or more accurately, we are grafted to Jesus so that His heart powers our lives, His will becomes ours, and His life courses through our veins. Well guess what: sin, death and the devil still assault us. After physical transplant surgery, our bodies would strive to reject a new heart as something foreign and dangerous, even though it's keeping us alive. We'd need daily anti-rejection medication for the transplanted heart to keep us alive. So too, Communion is our spiritual anti-rejection drug that allows the benefits of being "transplanted into Jesus" to keep us in faith, righteousness and eternal life.

There's another issue that I'm sure many of us encounter from time to time: spiritual dullness. Whether it's because we're tired or distracted, or our faith seems to be wavering and God seems especially far away, we simply feel flat. We don't get a thrill out of the hymns; the sermon leaves us cold; our prayers seem to bounce off the ceiling; the liturgy feels like it's dragging on forever, and all we notice about Communion is that the bread was especially chewy and the communion assistant spilled wine on our shirt. Shouldn't we do everyone a favor and sit this one out? Luther addressed this concern as well.

Suppose you say, "What shall I do if I cannot feel this need or if I do not experience hunger and thirst for the sacrament?" Answer: For those in such a state of mind that they cannot feel it, *I know no better advice than that they put their hands to their bosom to determine whether they are made of flesh and blood.* If you find that you are, then for your own good turn to St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians and hear what are the fruits of your flesh: "Now the works of the flesh (he says) are obvious: adultery, fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, murder, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these." If you cannot feel the need, at least believe the Scriptures. They will not lie to you, since they know your flesh better than you yourself do.

Again, look around you and see whether you are also in the world. If you are in the world, do not think that there will be any lack of sins and needs. *Just begin to act as if you want to become upright and cling to the*

gospel, and see whether you will not acquire enemies who harm, wrong, and injure you and give you cause to sin and do wrong. If you have not experienced this, then take it from the Scriptures, which everywhere give this testimony about the world.

Moreover, you will surely have the devil around you, too. You will not entirely trample him underfoot because our Lord Christ could not entirely avoid him. If you could see how many daggers, spears, and arrows are aimed at you every moment, you would be glad to come to the sacrament as often as you can. The only reason we go about so securely and heedlessly is that we neither imagine nor believe that we are in the flesh, in the wicked world, or under the kingdom of the devil.

It's helpful once again to go back to the "medicine of immortality" metaphor. I have to take thyroid medication every day. Many of you are on daily blood pressure pills; or you take insulin or antidepressants or some other regular medication. How often do any of you immediately feel differently when you've swallowed that pill? I know I don't. Even Advil takes a while to kick in. In fact, some drugs have unpleasant side effects; others seem to effect no change whatsoever in your day-to-day health. Still, if you pay attention to your doctor, you take them diligently. I went off regular thyroid pills for a while and after a couple of months I felt horrible: crampy legs, no energy, bleary-eyed. Not only that, it messed up my cholesterol level. It took a while, but not taking a seemingly innocuous pill had long-term nasty consequences.

Maybe we'd be better off if we thought of Holy Communion as the medication offered to us by the Great Physician, rather than as a special religious treat. Treats - whether they be yummy chocolates, a night on the town, or a vacation - are by definition options; we can live without them. And if we indulge too often, we can become sated. We "lose our taste" for something; we become bored with it; we move on and seek different treats to satisfy.

But Holy Communion isn't a treat or a luxury. We can't do without it; our Lord has carefully compounded the elixir of life in a form we can digest and utilize, body and soul together. He's given us not only a potent medicine *against* the "transplant rejecting forces" of the devil, the world, and our own frail flesh - he's also given us a medicine *for* strength, nourishment, comfort, and refreshment. Imagine taking a cancer drug that also provided vitamins, minerals, extra energy, and maybe a few pain-killers - and that didn't make you upchuck! *That's what Communion provides!* I'll let Luther have the last word on this.

Therefore, it is appropriately called food of the soul, for it nourishes and strengthens the new creature. For in the first instance, we are born anew through baptism. However, there are so many hindrances and attacks of the devil and the world that we often grow weary and faint and at times even stumble. Therefore the Lord's Supper is given as a daily food and sustenance so that our faith may be refreshed and strengthened and that it may not succumb in the struggle but become stronger and stronger. The

devil is a furious enemy; when he sees that we resist him and attack the old creature, and when he cannot rout us by force, he sneaks and skulks about at every turn, trying all kinds of tricks, and does not stop until he has finally worn us out so that we either renounce our faith or lose heart and become indifferent or impatient. For times like these, when our heart feels too sorely pressed, this comfort of the Lord's Supper is given to bring us new strength and refreshment.

So we are enjoined to come early and come often to the Table: no excuses. Take your pulse: if you have one, you need the good and great medicine Jesus offers. My Swedish grandmother used to say of her Scandinavian White-Meal-worthy rice pudding: *It's good for what ails you.* Trust me: Our Lord's Body and Blood *really is* good for what ails us. Taste, and see, just how gracious He is. Amen.