

**Maundy Thursday**  
**April 8, 2004**  
**Hebrews 10:15-25**

**Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke**

**In Holy Communion We Enter the Holy of Holies**

1. To gain the assurance of forgiveness
2. To gain strength as the Day approaches

***NIV Hebrews 10:15 The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: <sup>16</sup> "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds." <sup>17</sup> Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." <sup>18</sup> And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin. <sup>19</sup> Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, <sup>20</sup> by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, <sup>21</sup> and since we have a great priest over the house of God, <sup>22</sup> let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. <sup>23</sup> Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. <sup>24</sup> And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. <sup>25</sup> Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching.***

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In the tabernacle of Israel, the portable sanctuary of the LORD, there was a small, cube-shaped room, just 15 feet long, wide, and high. It was called the Most Holy Place or the Holy of Holies. Inside of the Most Holy Place was the Ark of the Covenant, the box in which were kept the two tablets of stone bearing the Ten Commandments, a jar of manna, and Aaron's staff. Atop the Ark were two golden angels facing each other with their wings spread. What was especially significant about the Most Holy Place is that God had promised to meet with Moses there above the outstretched wings of the angels and give him his commands for the Israelites. The Most Holy Place was God's sanctuary, the place where he promised to dwell among the Israelites.

It was also off-limits to the Israelites. Only one man, the high priest, could enter the Holy of Holies. And he could enter it only once a year on the Day of Atonement, or he would die. There was a clear message here: God is holy and sinful human beings cannot approach him. Sin brought about a tremendous separation between the holy God and sinful men.

But the message of tonight's epistle reading from Hebrews 10 is that Jesus closed that separation. Jesus atoned for our sins by sacrificing his own life for us. He reconciled us to God and brought us near. Jesus didn't do this by convincing his Father to re-write the rules and lower the standard for admission to his presence. He did this by carrying away our sin and furnishing us with his holiness. It says just before our text here in Hebrews 10, **"By one sacrifice Jesus has made perfect forever those who are being made holy."** (Heb. 10:14) With that perfection in God's sight through Jesus comes admission to the very presence of God, the Holy of Holies. This access to the presence of God was symbolized at the moment Jesus died, when there was an earthquake and the curtain in the temple that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place was torn from top to bottom. Access to the throne of God through the death of Christ!

The sacrament we call Holy Communion is really a means by which we Christians are able to enter the Holy of Holies. I know that what we see with our eyes may not always look so impressive. What meets our eyes? A thin wafer of bread and a tiny cup of wine. And these are distributed by pastors who are frail, fallible sinners and received by communicants who are also frail, fallible sinners. The singing during the distribution is sometimes weak and often accompanied by the crying of a baby or the fidgeting of those not yet old enough to participate. To our senses it seems that there's nothing remarkable here.

But there is something present here that our eyes can't see. Or as it says in the hymn we just sang, **"Here would I touch and handle things unseen."** Jesus' word and promise makes it so. He said, **"This is my body given for you."** And he said, **"This cup is the new covenant in my blood."** Jesus' body and blood are present here. In a way that defies human reason, Jesus himself is really present here. That's one reason why we call this sacrament Holy Communion. Here we are communing with our Lord. We are fellowshiping with him. That's why the celebration of Holy Communion is bracketed by liturgical songs that speak of Jesus coming and of seeing Jesus. In the *Sanctus* we sing, **"Blessed is he who**

*comes in the name of the Lord,"* and in the *Song of Simeon* we say, *"My eyes have seen your salvation."*

When we see it this way, who can resist the invitation to come to this feast? Who would decline the opportunity to fellowship with Jesus? Is it any wonder that the hymn writer says, *"Too soon we rise, the vessels disappear."* The brief, bright hour of fellowship and love is over too quickly.

The invitation to fellowship with Jesus as we partake of this sacrament would be reason enough to want to participate, but tonight, in light of these verses in Hebrews 10, I want to remind you of two additional reasons for partaking frequently of the Lord's Supper. The first reason is to gain the assurance of forgiveness.

### **1. To gain the assurance of forgiveness**

If it's true that God is holy and that he dwells in unapproachable light, then isn't it reasonable to think that we should fear to approach him? We're sinners—and we can't fool God with outward displays of piety. Perhaps we should be like Esther, the Jewish beauty who became queen of Persia. She feared that approaching her own husband, King Xerxes, without his invitation could cost her life. Should we fear to approach God? The answer is, "Aside from Jesus, Yes, definitely." But the writer of Hebrews speaks to us this way: **"We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus."** Sinners we are, yes. But through faith in Jesus we've been plunged beneath the cleansing flood of his lifeblood and we've lost all our guilty stains. Or to say it another way, we've been baptized. Our hearts have been sprinkled to cleanse our guilty consciences and our bodies have been washed with pure water. Now, through faith in Jesus, we can approach God with confidence.

But because even after conversion we retain our sinful natures we need the assurance of God's forgiveness every day. We can't lay our heads on our pillows at night without having to acknowledge that it was another day of failing to live up to our high calling. We have to say with the psalmist, **"If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?"** (Ps. 130:3) Let me just focus on a narrow band in the great spectrum of sin, namely, our sins against the Sacrament. Don't we have to admit that at times our hunger and thirst for the sacrament have been something less than intense? And what about those times when we've gone to the Lord's Supper but been so preoccupied that we barely thought about the treasure we were receiving? It can also be the case that we want the assurance of

God's grace, but we want that assurance without having repented of our sins. "Just as I am" is fine if it means sinful but repentant. It's not so fine if it means sinful and unwilling to repent.

I need God's forgiveness every day. So do you. The good news is that in Jesus we have it. We have that on the authority of the Holy Spirit. He said through the prophet Jeremiah, **"This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds."** And he says, **"Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more."** That was the Old Covenant, which Israel found impossible to keep. This is the New Covenant which was put into force when Jesus shed his blood on the cross. This New Covenant is a covenant of forgiveness in which our sins are no longer remembered. As we come to Lord's Table, Jesus invites us to partake of his blood of the new covenant for the assurance that all our sins have been forgiven.

There is a memorial element to the Lord's Supper. Jesus said we were to "do this in remembrance" of him. But more than a memorial meal, the Sacrament is also a means of grace through which God actually forgives our sins. That's why, as we leave, we say a prayer of thanks to God for giving us "pardon and peace in this sacrament."

But let me ask you: Is there something else you'd like to ask for while you're at the throne of God? The author of Hebrews prompts us a bit with a series of encouragements to live lives of service to God and other people. He says, *"Let us draw near to God with the full assurance of faith..."* and *"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess..."* and *"Let us consider how we may spur one another on to love and good deeds."* Here the author of this letter is speaking to us as Christians, as people who have been given new spiritual life and, along with it, the ability to respond to admonition and encouragements like these. But even as we hear these encouragements we face threats and challenges to our faith. So we need more strength. We need the strength to live in these last days as our Savior's return approaches. This is the second reason for frequently partaking of the sacrament.

## **2. To gain strength as the Day approaches**

One of the author's encouragements is, *"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess."* These Hebrews were certainly in need of this encouragement. Some of them had been flirting with the notion of a return to Judaism because they were growing weary and losing heart due to the opposition to their Christian faith. Some were fearful

enough of being identified as Christians that they were reluctant to visit Christians who had been imprisoned. Some may have stopped coming to worship for the same reason.

We, too, need to be encouraged to *hold unswervingly to the hope we profess*. I don't doubt that there are things in each of our lives that we find discouraging. Maybe we're disappointed with ourselves, or with some family member, or with someone at church. It could be our work or our financial situation or our health that's got us discouraged. Maybe we've even begun to think, "What's the use? If this is how God treats his children, why should I bother with Christianity?" It's a certainty that our strength isn't sufficient to continually overcome these discouragements. We aren't that strong. But, as it says here, "*He who promised is faithful.*" So come to the Lord's Supper for spiritual strengthening. The God who faithfully forgives your sins will strengthen you for the obstacles you must face.

With another encouragement, the author says, "*Let us consider how we may spur one another on to love and good deeds,*" and then he expands on that by adding, "*Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*" Passages like these remind us that it's God's will that we live as Christians not in isolation but in fellowship with other Christians. Only then can we spur one another on and encourage one another. This is what I find interesting about this passage. It's one of the most prominent Bible passages that admonishes us to gather with our fellow believers for to hear and study of the Word, to pray and receive the sacrament. But surprisingly, the author doesn't keep meeting together because *you* need it, but don't give up meeting together because if you do you won't be able to spur others on and encourage them. The man who told me once that he wasn't coming to church because he and his sons spent Sunday mornings hiking in the woods and they could find God there had forgotten this. So has the person who insists that he can worship God at home by reading the Bible for himself or by watching some religious program on television. No doubt the wonders of creation can remind us of our God and there's no question that we can worship in the privacy of our homes. But if we do that, how do we encourage our fellow believers? How do we spur them on to love and good deeds? Not to mention, how do we receive Communion?

No, it's better to be part of a fellowship of believers. It's better to come to Holy Communion and there receive strength from God to look beyond the small circle of our own needs and interests. There we gain

the strength to follow the progression from learning the faith to teaching the faith. There we find opportunities in the community of believers to serve and encourage and give.

Yes, it would be enough if Holy Communion were only a brief opportunity to fellowship with the true God and with his Son Jesus. But there's even more to be gained at the Lord's Table. There's the much-needed assurance of our forgiveness and the strength to live for God as the Day approaches. It's in love for us that Jesus commands, "Do this." Amen.