

Jesus had just given to His Church the gift of the Sacrament of the Altar, “**This is My body which is given for you...this cup is the new testament in My blood.**” The disciples have heard the whole of the Gospel in a nutshell, the Lord’s giving of Himself – His body into death, His blood shed for us – for the forgiveness of our sins. And right after this, those first Christians to hear these blessed words and receive those holy gifts argue. Arguing per se is not wrong. There are edifying arguments, whereby iron sharpens iron. Much of this goes on in the Church, throughout history as we have been studying in the Bible Class as we look at the early councils of the church. A good part of the seminary experience is arguing that fosters learning. There are usually arguments about various aspects of Scripture, things to consider as we study God’s Word, how to relate one part to another, coming to a better understanding of things.

But what the disciples argue about that night is not the meaning of what Jesus has just said and done, or how soon after creation Adam and Eve fell into sin, or if the priest and king Melchizedek who blessed Abraham was, in fact, Noah’s son, Shem. No, what they are arguing about in the Upper Room is themselves, who is the greatest among them. It seems they are finally cluing in that something is going to happen to Jesus, and the discussion turns then to who is going to continue this thing, who is going to rule as lord among them.

We could judge the disciples harshly, criticize them for their ridiculous looking inward and competition with one another after such a tremendous gift from the Lord. But we are, in fact, quite like them, our minds set on worldly things, power, control, influence, and prestige in the things of this life. There are plenty of occasions in wider church history, in the church’s life together, where it essentially becomes an argument about who is going to rule as lord.

That this happens here with the Twelve is a comfort to us. It might be easy for some to get discouraged when difficulties, especially difficulties with fellow believers, arise. But we see first here that we are in good company. You are not going to be more sanctified, more spared the weight of the self-idolatrous sinful flesh, than our Lord’s chosen who were with Him day after day for three years. If they have such a hard time getting over themselves, not being so concerned with their own greatness, then you can be sure that you will also. It is a tall order to die to the self and take up one’s cross.

Thankfully, we also see a second thing in this episode. Our Lord shows us in such a gracious way how He deals with us poor sinners, puffed up on our own egos. He teaches them and us in a gentle way, slowly directs our gaze to look at things another way. He reveals to the disciples that in the Kingdom of God, things work in the reverse from how they do in the world. In the world, kings, leaders, and rulers, call themselves “benefactors.” These are those who can and do favors by people. They dole out the goods, the favors, the breaks to those below them who have won the higher ups’ favor.

Our Lord rules out any such notion for those who belong to Him. With His Christians it is different. The “**greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves.**” To make sure they really get the point, Jesus illustrates what has just happened at that feast that very night, “**who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves?**” Is it the one who eats the feast, or the one who serves the feast who is greater? Clearly, Jesus says, in their way of thinking, the way we think when you go to a fancy restaurant and eat out, when you are the customer looking for some good to buy, it is the one

who reclines, the one who sits, the one with the purchasing power to enjoy the finer things in life. That is what the disciples were vying for, to be served by the others, to be great as the world is great.

Our Lord shows that it is the other way around. He is the One who gets down, girds Himself, and washes their feet. He is the One who takes the regular Passover bread and cup of wine, and gives them as the tokens of salvation. He says, **“I am among you as the One who serves.”** He had already said on the way to Jerusalem, **“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as the ransom for many.”** He is the greatest One, eternal God, the beloved Son of the Father, and He has come and served by His death for us, setting us free from sin, death, and the power of the devil. He served as He instituted the means by which that redemption would be delivered to His people.

He doesn't just serve that night, that Easter weekend. He serves as He sends His apostles and then His pastors out to do as He has done, to deliver the gifts which He has purchased with His blood. His service goes on in this assembly each week. That is why we call it “The Divine Service,” because Jesus, the Divine One, is STILL among us as the One who serves. He is still the One who comes to serve us. He wipes out our sin the Holy Absolution. He speaks into our ears His life-giving Words. He delivers to us His body and blood with the forgiveness and eternal life that they won!

From start to finish the beating heart of the worship service is not US serving God, but our Lord Jesus continuing to be among us as the One who serves. This is important to remember, especially in the past forty or fifty years, where a very unhelpful way of thinking has crept into how Lutherans think about worship. It is a fixation on people participating, being active, and involved. Probably many if not all of you, have heard that idea at some point, “We need to get more people involved in the service, the whole body of Christ should participate and be active!” The chief goal of Christian worship is not to get as many people involved in some activity as possible, but to receive Christ's service to us.

Our Lord Jesus is the One who comes to serve us, to provide and deliver what we cannot get for ourselves. The central activity of Christian worship, then, is His speaking, His delivering. To be sure, as our mothers all taught us, when someone gives you a gift, you say, “Thank you!” There is the response of Christian thanksgiving, especially in connection with the Sacrament of the Altar, what since ancient times has been called the Eucharist, the thanksgiving. Not because the main thing in the Lord's Supper is our giving thanks, but because our Lord gave thanks, and this great gift of our Lord prompts our deepest, most heartfelt thanksgiving.

There is also the response of our prayers and praise. Knowing who God is, believing in what He has done for us, confident in His promises, we call upon Him in prayer and praise Him. But none of that happens without His serving, His speaking, His delivering. To be a Christian, a hearer of the Word, is to live on the receiving end of the downward arrow of God's activity for us in Christ Jesus. This is what Jesus is getting at when He takes a child, sets him in the midst of the disciples and says if they would be saved they must turn and become as a child. A child lives by receiving. His life, his name, his food, his clothing, his shelter, everything he needs to live is all given. So it is also to be a Christian, receiving everything that we need for our life with God as a gift.

This is what St. Bartholomew and his brother apostles learned, to be on the receiving end of their Lord's service for them. And then they were sent out by Him to be His hands and voice, the means by which He continued to serve others, no longer counting themselves, not even their very lives as great. Everywhere they went throughout the world they established a table, where the Lord Jesus continued to be among His

own to serve them, where they tasted heaven on earth, where the incorruptible and unending life of the Risen Christ was imparted to them, put into their flesh and blood by His flesh and blood. In that confidence they apostles met their deaths, all but John, as martyrs, and perhaps none so horrible as Bartholomew, a knife used to remove his skin before being beheaded or crucified.

But because into Bartholomew went the Body and the Blood of the Lamb of God who had taken away the sins of the world, he is not among the dead. He lives in Christ forevermore, together with all who feast at the Kingdom's table in saving faith, the very table to which we are joined today.

Praise be to God for this table that strengthens and keeps us in saving faith so that when we finally pass through death we will enter that heavenly city and so join with Bartholomew, his brother apostles, and all the redeemed in singing the praises of Jesus Christ, our beloved Servant King, to whom be glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit.