

You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train and receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious, that the Lord God may dwell there. (Psalm 68:18 as quoted in Ephesians 4:8)

In the name of + Jesus.

This past Christmas my wife and I decided that our four boys needed a special gift. They are the rambunctious sort, unlike your children I'm sure, and they do not like to share toys with one another. They do not always get along. So we decided to give them a gift that they had been asking for, albeit a gift that they would have to share and enjoy together.

And so on Christmas morning, our four boys descended upon the Christmas tree like ants on a summer picnic. The oooooos and aaaaahhhhs are always gratifying to a parent's heart! And there under the tree was a train! A model train with a boxcar, coal car, and a caboose! An electric train with a headlight, going round and round the tree! Pretty cool!

Well, they played with this train, together, for most of Christmas Day and part of the next day and part of the day after that. But by the day when ladies are dancing and lords are leaping – not so much! The newness had worn off – the gift was no longer exciting. And then they started asking for more tracks, more cars, little trees, houses, and all sorts of additional pieces. The train set, as it had been given, was no longer enough. It needed to be bigger and better. It needed to be designed by them. At least they were getting along...for now anyway! Was this the unity my wife and I were hoping to bring about amongst our rambunctious boys? Did the gift achieve its purpose? And what about the problem we face now...our boys no longer being satisfied with what we had given them and the arguing about how to further expand the set?

Gifts are spoken of in our text for today. And a train is spoken of as well! Not the model railroad type of train, but rather the robes of Christ by which we have been clothed and covered.¹ He has captured us through the waters of Baptism, adopting us as sons and daughters. And He gives great gifts to us!

However, you don't always like His gifts, do you? And you get tired of them. At first, they're great...but then you want more...more gifts, more control, more personal design and input. And pretty soon, well, the gift no longer means so much, even if you are getting along just fine with everyone else...which based on my experience as a parent, has its ups and downs .

This applies quite well to our conference this week on the Sacrament. God our Father captured us – adopted us – and we are now linked with Christ through Baptism and given the great gifts of forgiveness of sins, life and salvation to eat and to drink!

¹ Isaiah 61:10

We pastors fail when we think that our outward unity is the most important thing. We fail when we think that we stand united merely by our agreement to practice closed communion. We fail when we think that everything is GREAT because our Synod still maintains, in writing, this practice. THIS IS NOT UNITY! Such outward unity neglects the gifts given to us by Christ and places the importance on our agreements or resolutions. This is not what Walther meant when he wrote that “communion is our banner.” Does God hope that His children will get along and enjoy the gifts He has given? OF COURSE! But NEVER because of what we ourselves have accomplished, built or designed.

And you laypeople fail as well. You fail when you come to an Altar, any Altar, and DEMAND that you have the right to commune! You wave your little LCMS membership card and say for all to hear WE HAVE OUTWARD UNITY, THEREFORE I MUST BE GIVEN THE SACRAMENT!

I ask you, is this why we commune together? Because we merely have outward unity? To show such unity? And what about Altars where error is practiced & propagated? Do we wave our membership cards, tout our unity and play with our train because it is now OUR gift?

Charles Porterfield Krauth said this:

To go to the same table with those whom we know to be in error in regard to any truth which Christ has revealed, is not only to hold the truth of Scripture cheap, but to make such persons all the more settled in their error or indifferent to the importance of truth.²

Christ has revealed the truth and Christ gives the gifts. Therefore unity begins with Christ! Christ is both man and God. Christ, the Word incarnate, who descended into our flesh, into this sinful world and has crushed the devil! Christ who has redeemed you by shedding His holy precious blood in His innocent suffering and death! Christ who now gives to you HIMSELF, His body and His blood in the bread and the wine! Your sins forgiven – in the name of Christ! There is your UNITY! It’s Christ! It does not begin nor end with the unity of your brothers or sisters or brick & mortar churches. It does not need anything added to it. UNITY is gifted to you because UNITY has everything to do with Christ - united as man and God and now united with you.

In Theses XIII on Communion Fellowship, Walther writes:

The more unionism and syncretism is the sin and corruption of our time, the more the loyalty of the orthodox church now demands that the Lord’s Supper not be misused as a means of external union without internal unity of faith.³

Walther hits the nail on the head as he concludes his theses. External union is not the main thing, especially where there is error – unionism and syncretism. He further expounds:

² Reiss, Oswald “What Does the Bible Say?” © 1960 p.52

³ C.F.W. Walther “Communion Fellowship” 15th District Convention, Addison, Ill June 15th, 1870 - taken from “Essays for the Church” CPH: St.Louis © 1992 p.227

The Antichrist long ago succeeded in seating himself in the midst of God's temple through false security and carelessness in the church. Later, through the false security and carelessness of the church, the false Reformed-Lutheran union also crept in. Now it is up to us to assert ourselves over against these enemies and in particular to disentangle ourselves from the webs and threads of the syncretistic spirit of the times. May the faithful and merciful God aid us and fill our hearts with hatred for the lying spirit and an inner, true love for the Word of God and truth.⁴

Our banner is not how we practice the Lord's Supper or the unity we build with it...our banner is communion...meaning, simply, that our banner is He who is both God and man, He who has communion with both God and man...our banner is Christ! This is what the early church devoted themselves to...this is the one body and one Spirit that Paul writes of to the Ephesians: ONE LORD, ONE FAITH, ONE BAPTISM. The one body, a gift given to the captives in the train, the una sancta. One Spirit given to this body. One hope of being led to eternal life, the resurrection that awaits. These are all the domata, the gifts given to you and me, captives in the train of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who who has conquered sin, death and the devil!

How important are these gifts for us? How important are they for pastors, laypeople and fathers and mothers who desire to give the best gifts to our children?

Luther writes:

Further we believe that in this Christian church we have the forgiveness of sins, which is granted through the holy sacraments and absolution as well as through all the comforting words of the entire Gospel. Toward forgiveness is directed everything that is to be preached concerning the sacraments and, in short, the entire Gospel and all the duties of Christianity. Forgiveness is needed constantly, for although God's grace has been won by Christ, and holiness has been wrought by the Holy Spirit through God's Word in the unity of the Christian church, yet because we are encumbered with our flesh we are never without sin.⁵

Yes, my children need discipline. They even fight over who gets to play with the train set and how to build and what to do with it. And my wife and I will continue to teach and admonish them accordingly. But I know my children are sinners. And I also know that the best way to unite them has been done in the waters of Baptism and is being done in their preparation for the Sacrament. Our banner is Christ. He is the gift. His is the unity bestowed upon us.

*You ascended on high, leading a host of captives in your train and receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious, that the Lord God may dwell there.*⁶

May we not neglect these gifts.

In the name of + Jesus.

Amen.

⁴ ibid

⁵ Luther, Martin. "Large Catechism" 2nd Chief Part: "communion of the saints" 54

⁶ Psalm 68:18 as quoted in Ephesians 4:8