

St. James Lutheran Church  
Easter VII/First Communion  
May 4, 2008

First Reading: Acts 1:6-14

Second Reading: I Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

Gospel: John 17:1-11

Taste and See  
By Richard Holmer

On this last Sunday in the Easter season we welcome ten of our members to the Lord's Table.

- Today they will share in the sacrament of Holy Communion for the first time.
- They have been preparing for this occasion over the past five weeks.
- Along with their parents, they have been learning about the history, the theology and the practice of this holy meal that has such a central place in our life of faith.

For all of us who are communing members of the church, there is something both very familiar and also profoundly mysterious about Holy Communion.

- It is a regular part of our experience.
- We know the language of communion.
- We are at home with the choreography: we know how to come and go from the altar, how to kneel, how to raise our empty hands to receive the bread of life.
- We're familiar with the taste of the bread and wine.
- As with any ritual, we can go through it almost without thinking.

Yet when we do take time to think about Holy Communion, we quickly realize that it's beyond our capacity to define precisely what it is and what it means.

- We sense the power and significance of this sacrament, yet find this far from easy to explain.
- To receive communion is to experience a close encounter with God—and such an encounter will always be filled with both meaning and mystery.

And so this morning I invite you to think with me about this thing we do together week by week, this eating and drinking, this communing with our Lord and Savior.

Our first reading describes Christ's ascension into heaven.

- Christ's departure from earth is as wondrous and amazing as his arrival.
  - He comes to us as one born of a virgin, conceived by the Holy Spirit.
  - And he leaves by a supernatural act of levitation—disappearing into the clouds.
- Both stories strain the limits of rational explanation.

It's hard for us to understand how Jesus made his way from earth to heaven.

- But it's not hard at all to understand the reaction of the disciples to his departure.
- They all stood there with heads tilted back, staring up into the sky, long after Jesus has disappeared from sight.
- I imagine their face were a mixture of anxiety and confusion and longing—like the faces of parents who keep staring at the departure gate long after their son or daughter has boarded the plane to head off to college.
- They felt the pain of separation; Jesus was gone.

Yet before leaving, Jesus had made a promise to his disciples. He assured them: "I will be with you always, to the end of the age."

- How could this be?
- How could the departed Savior still be with them?

One answer is by sharing Holy Communion.

- At the last supper, Jesus instructed his followers: "Do this in remembrance of me."
- As they remembered and carried out his instructions, the disciples did in fact experience Christ's promised presence.

This is our experience as well. We believe Christ is truly present to us in Holy Communion.

- As we share in this sacrament, we not only remember Jesus and what he has done for us, we not only look forward to being with Jesus in heaven, we also experience the living presence of Jesus, with us now.
- Instead of feeling separated and abandoned, through Holy Communion we feel joined to Christ, and blessed by his close proximity.
- How this can be true we do not attempt to explain.
- We simply trust and rejoice that it is true.
- Christ comes to us in, with and under the bread and wine we receive.

In our second reading, we are encouraged to "Cast all your anxiety on the Lord, because he cares for you." We do this every time we come to the Lord's table.

- Along with our faith and our gratitude, what we also bring to the table is our neediness:
  - Our worries
  - Our guilt
  - Our fears
  - Our uncertainty
- Sometimes we come carrying a lot of heavy baggage.
- We may feel so burdened that we wonder if we should come at all.

- Then we recall Christ's gracious invitation: "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."
- So we do come.
- And what ever load we are carrying can be left at the altar
- Picture in your mind's eye all the sacks of grief and guilt, all the regrets, all the dirty laundry that gets unloaded and left behind at this table.

We approach this table with confidence, because as we are assured in our reading from I Peter: "Christ will himself restore, support, strengthen and establish you."

- \* To receive forgiveness for all our sins is to be restored.
- \* To be welcomed, no matter our circumstances, at Christ's table is to be supported.
- \* To receive our Lord's body and blood is to be strengthened and established.

What a marvelous and holy transaction this is!

- We trade our guilt for Christ's mercy.
- We trade our uncertainty for blessed assurance.
- We trade our anxiety for the peace of God.
- We trade our weakness for Christ's strength.

In our gospel for today we hear a portion of Christ's final discourse at the Last Supper. He says: "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

- To know Christ is to know eternal life.
- Jesus teaches us that eternal life is not a life that begins down the road after we die—it starts now, in knowing Christ.
- Eternal life, as Jesus describes it, is even more about the quality of life than it is the quantity of life.
- To know Jesus is to know the Way, the Truth and the Life in a personal way.

- Holy Communion is where Jesus meets us and makes himself known.
- It's not the only place—but it is a sure and dependable place. At communion Jesus reveals himself in the breaking of the bread.

Here we get a taste of eternal life, a foretaste of the feast to come, a glimpse of heavenly blessedness.

Around this table we experience a moment of intimacy with God.

- The rest of the world fades away for a while, and we know peace and joy and a closeness to God and to the people of God.
- That moment is a preview of the eternal goodness of heaven.
- Henri Nouwen calls it “an experience of ‘at-homeness’ on the way home.”

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At the end of today's gospel we hear Jesus pray for us: “Holy Father, may they be one, as we are one.” That prayer is answered as we gather at this table. Here we draw close to Christ, and to one another, and to those saints who are at home with God. We are One, as Father and Son are One.

Through the eyes of faith, we are able to discern the Body of Christ.

- In the bread we share
- In the gathered community of faith

Communion helps to make us who we are called to be--the Body of Christ in this world: his arms and legs and hands, continuing his ministry of grace and reconciliation.

Here at this table we experience what Jesus describes when he says: “I am the vine and you are the branches.”

At my home church the altar rail is carved with grape vines.

- The grapes, of course, bring to mind the wine of the sacrament—the blood of Christ.
- The vines also point to our oneness in the true vine, in Christ from whom life flows.

- By abiding in Christ, by communing in Christ, we are empowered to bear good fruit.

Holy Communion, finally, is not something to be explained, but experienced.

Our God is not just an idea or a doctrine, God is personal and alive—a presence.

- It's why God didn't send a news release, but came in person, in Jesus Christ.
- It's why God continues to come to us through this wonderful sacrament.

As much as we can come to learn and understand about our Lord and about Holy Communion—we could never presume to know it all. God is greater than our hearts and minds. Yet we see the grace of our God in the way God comes to us in a way we can taste and touch and see and believe. As the psalm says: "Taste and see that the Lord is good."

Amen.