

# KEEP IT SIMPLE

Matthew 26:26-29

Fifth Wednesday in Lent (Series B)

March 17, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson is from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 26, verses 26 through 29. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 26, beginning at verse 26, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>26</sup> Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." <sup>27</sup> And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, <sup>28</sup> for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>29</sup> I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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The biblical teaching of the Lord's Supper is quite simple. Most biblical teachings are, at a basic level, quite simple. God desires to be known, so it is quite natural that he would reveal himself in simple terms. But with most biblical teachings, you can also go deeper. You can start with the simple level of understanding and explore wonderful depths beyond that. And this is also good. It would be odd if we learned the basic truths of God and weren't captivated by his goodness so that we want to learn more and more. So with most biblical teachings, there is a clear and simple level of understanding, and this clear and simple level is sufficient, but there are also depths to explore.

But the biblical teaching of the Lord's Supper is a little bit different. It starts simple, and it stays simple. Christians have, of course, tried to go deeper than the simple level revealed in Scripture, but that exercise is fraught with danger, because it relies on speculation. Scripture doesn't go much deeper than the simple revelation of the Lord's Supper.

So there are really just two basic truths to understand concerning the Lord's Supper. And the Small Catechism deals with them in the first two questions on the Sacrament of the Altar. The catechism asks, "What is the Sacrament of the Altar?" and, "What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?" In other words, "What is it?" and, "What's it for?"

What is it? It is the body and blood of Jesus. And what's it for? It is for the forgiveness of sins. That's it. That is the basic Biblical teaching of the Lord's Supper. It is the body and blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. Tonight we will consider these two truths, and next week we will consider a few questions that arise from them, but at no point does the Lord's Supper get complicated. It might be mysterious. You might wonder, "How can this be?" There are a few other questions to answer, there is some Old Testament background to explore, but it never gets complicated.

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On the night in which Jesus was betrayed, he was observing the Passover with his disciples. The Passover was a yearly remembrance of God's great deliverance event in the Old Testament. It was the night God brought them out of slavery in Egypt. He delivered them by sending death

upon Egypt, and the Passover lamb was a means for protecting Israel from that death. Each Hebrew house sacrificed a lamb and painted the blood on the doorposts of the house. Then they roasted and ate the lamb, along with unleavened bread. That evening, the LORD passed through Egypt, killing all the firstborn, but he passed over the houses with blood painted on the doorposts. Then God led them out of Egypt through the Red Sea. All this happened in one night. So Israel was free from slavery and belonged only to the LORD. And, according to the LORD's command, the people of Israel remembered this every year by observing the Passover in their homes (Ex. 12:43-51).

This was the meal Jesus was observing with his disciples. It was also the last meal he would share with them before his crucifixion. And the people of Israel would follow a liturgy during the meal. We see a little bit more of it in Luke's account. The host would present each part of the meal while stating the significance of it. There was a place for the unleavened bread, the bitter herbs, and multiple cups of wine. But toward the end of the Passover liturgy, there comes a point where Jesus goes off script.

He took bread, blessed it, broke it, gave it to his disciples, and said, **"Take, eat; this is my body"** (26:26). This was not part of the Passover liturgy. Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to his disciples, saying, **"Drink of it all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins"** (26:27-28). This, also, was not part of the Passover liturgy. Jesus goes off script because he's instituting something new.

It is from Jesus' words of institution that we get the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. There's no hint of symbolism. He's not talking about what the bread of the Passover represents, or what the bitter herbs represent, or what the various cups of wine represent. He does something else. He talks about what *is*. He says, **"This is my body,"** and, **"This is my blood."** This is the first and most basic truth concerning the Lord's Supper. It is Christ's body, and it is his blood. This is the basis for the Small Catechism's assertion that the Sacrament of the Altar "is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, given unto us Christians to eat and to drink, as it was instituted by Christ Himself."

But it's so easy to go down the wrong path by overthinking it. Instead of simply taking Jesus at his word, we try to figure out what he means, as if he doesn't actually mean what he says. When I teach this in confirmation class, I ask the students, "When Jesus says, **'This is my body,'** and, **'This is my blood,'** does he really mean that the bread is actually his body and the wine is actually his blood?" I kind of lead them down the wrong path for a moment so that they can find their way out of it. So they answer, "No, it must mean that it represents his body and blood." It's kind of like a vaccine for them. If I don't lead them down this wrong path, they'll probably find it on their own, and then I don't know if they'll find their way out. So after I let them go down the wrong path, I ask, "What does Jesus say?" And they think about it for a moment. They know the answer, but they're trying to figure out if they should actually say it. And eventually someone says, "He says it is his body and blood." And I ask, "So what is it?" And someone says, "It is his body and blood?" with a question mark. And I say, "How do you know that?" And they say, "Because Jesus says it is."

How does this work? We don't really know. Most of our Protestant friends go down the wrong path by denying that the bread and wine are actually the body and blood of Jesus. They overthink it, and conclude that since they can't figure it out, it must not actually be. Our Roman Catholic friends go down a different path. They say that the bread and wine transform into the body and blood of Jesus, so that it is no longer bread and wine. This is what they call

“transubstantiation;” that is, the substance transforms from one thing into another. They go down the wrong path by saying too much. Again, they’re overthinking it. We just say, “It is.”

You might hear someone say that the Lutheran view is “consubstantiation.” If you’ve never heard that term, that’s okay, because it’s not really what we confess. The prefix “con-” means “with.” That is, Jesus’ body and blood are there with, or beside the bread and wine. That’s not really what we’re saying either. Some of our Protestant friends confess a form of consubstantiation, saying that Jesus’ body and blood is present in a spiritual way with the bread and wine. They’re trying to get closer to a substantial view of the Lord’s Supper, but they’re not willing to confess anything physical. We do. We say that it is the body and blood of Jesus.

The preposition the Small Catechism uses is the word “under.” And by using that word, we don’t mean that the substance of bread and wine is right here, and a quarter of an inch or so underneath that, are the body and blood of Jesus. No. We mean that the body and blood of Jesus are there under the forms of bread and wine. Or we could say they are there in the forms of bread and wine. They take the form of bread and wine. It’s all just another way of saying, “The bread is the body of Christ, and the wine is the blood of Christ.” It just is.

We don’t have a fancy title for our view of the Lord’s Supper, because fancy titles are used as a shorthand for something more complex. We just say, “It is.” Flat out. It is what Jesus says it is. It’s not complicated, so it doesn’t need a fancy title.

It does not stop being bread and wine. It is what it appears to be. It is what it tastes like. It is what all of our senses know it to be. That is, bread and wine. And it is also what Jesus says it is.

So we’re really confessing a miracle here, that Jesus Christ takes on the simple forms of bread and wine. Some of our Protestant friends argue, “The finite is not capable of the infinite.” That’s their phrase. They even say it in Latin sometimes, which lets us know they’re really serious. We do that too when we’re really serious about something. “The finite is not capable of the infinite.” They mean that simple physical forms of bread and wine are not capable of holding all the divinity of Christ within them. To which we reply, “Well, of course not. The capability for this miracle does not lie within the power of bread and wine, but within the power of God.” Bread and wine do not have the ability to contain Jesus, but Jesus has the ability to take on these forms. It’s somewhat similar to the incarnation of Jesus. The human body does not have the ability to contain all the fullness of God, but it did, even in the microscopic form of a zygote, when Jesus was conceived in the Virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit. The fullness of God was pleased to dwell in his physical body, and it still does (Col. 1:19; 2:9). A similar miracle occurs with the elements of bread and wine. The power for the miracle does not come from the physical elements, but from God. It all comes back to ... guess what ... Jesus’ words when he says, “**This is my body,**” and, “**This is my blood.**” That’s what it is.

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So now the second question: “What is it for?” And again we find the answer in Jesus’ words: “For the forgiveness of sins.” And this truth flows from the reality of what it is. Jesus’ body was pierced for our transgressions (Is. 53:5). His blood was poured out for the forgiveness of our sins (26:28). So if the bread and wine are what Jesus says they are, his body and blood, then they carry to us the benefits of what he did for us with his body and blood, namely, the forgiveness of sins. So we rely on the words of Jesus when we confess that the benefit of eating and drinking is the forgiveness of sins. And where sins are forgiven, there are also the benefits of life and salvation. The bottom line, again, is that we take Jesus at his Word.

We should expect to receive what Jesus promises: the forgiveness of sins. And we should not expect things he does not promise.

## KEEP IT SIMPLE (Matthew 26:26-29)

At various times, and in various places, the Church has sometimes fallen into a superstitious attitude regarding the Lord's Supper. Superstition is when you connect unrelated things, as if there is a cause and effect relationship between them. It's like when baseball players won't step on the first or third base lines when they take the field or when they come back to the dugout. If they do it on the way out, they might commit an error. If they do it on the way back in, they might strike out in their next at bat. Well, they might do those things anyway, but it won't be because of the chalk line. The Lord's Supper has sometimes been used as a sort of good luck charm in order to heal a disease or before going to war or for some other circumstance where we want some extra help. But these are just superstitions, because there is no promise of God connecting these things. The promise of God in to the Lord's Supper is the forgiveness of sins. So we can include the other benefits that necessarily flow from the forgiveness of sins, but we cannot link other, unrelated things to the Lord's Supper.

Here's another error, and this one hits closer to home: Shortly after the AFLC was formed, so I'm talking in the 1960s here, we had a debate about whether the Lord's Supper actually forgives sins, or if it merely strengthens our faith. From Christ's words, "For the forgiveness of sins," it's pretty clear. And the Small Catechism leaves no wiggle room for us when it says, "Through these words, the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given unto us in the Sacrament." But we had this debate. And the side that argued, "It does not forgive sins, but merely strengthens our faith," actually prevailed. And by, "prevail," I don't mean that they convinced the other side, or that this became official AFLC teaching, but simply that the other side was forced out of our seminary. I think this is kind of a black eye on our church body, because, for a time, our teachers directly contradicted Jesus' own words and the teaching of the Small Catechism.

The theological basis for this false teaching was the notion that God only forgives our sins once. That is, our sins are forgiven, once and for all, when we are converted, and we don't need to have them forgiven again. This idea stems from American Revivalism in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, where a heavy emphasis was based on having a conversion experience, and after that the emphasis shifted to getting progressively better and better. So preaching and teaching for Christians focused, not on the Gospel (that was for unbelievers), but on the Law.

Now, it's true that when God forgives our sins, he forgives all of them, past, present, and future. But he still continues to forgive us on a daily basis. I don't mean that we pass in and out of being forgiven, like we commit a sin, then God forgives us, and we remain forgiven until we commit another sin, and we fall back out of grace. Rather, God forgives us over and over again through the Word and the Sacraments, while we remain in a state of grace. The Gospel maintains the central place in the life of a Christian.

The error was never unanimously accepted. Some of the men who were seminary students at that time rejected it and later became seminary professors themselves, teaching the biblical truth as expressed in the Small Catechism. And I don't think there are very many pastors left who hold to the error.

Now it may be true that the Lord's Supper also strengthens our faith, but Christ's specific promise is that it forgives sins. And this is what we must believe. The Lord's Supper confirms this forgiveness to us. And that's not merely that it strengthens our assurance that our sins are forgiven, but that it actually forgives us. As God has forgiven your sins, so he continues to forgive your sins. Again, it's simply a matter of taking Jesus at his Word. If Jesus says his body and blood forgives sins, then they do.

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These two points are enough for tonight. Next week we'll think a little more about how simple elements can give such great benefits, as well as a few practical questions that flow from these first two points. If you have any specific questions you want me to address next week, please let me know. You can, of course, remain anonymous. And I should have mentioned this at the start of the series, that if you have questions you want me to address regarding Baptism or Confession, or even if you have objections to any of these teachings, I will do my best to address those as well.

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The biblical teaching on the Lord's Supper is quite simple. If there's anything complicated about it, it's actually in dealing with the objections to the plain meaning of Christ's words.

What is it? The bread is the body of Christ. The wine is the blood of Christ. This is the same body and blood of Christ that was crucified for our sins, was raised from the dead, and ascended into heaven. And so this body and blood delivers to you what Christ earned by his death and resurrection: the forgiveness of sins. It is what Jesus says it is, and it does what Jesus says it does. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.