

What about Holy Communion?

With social distance rules in effect, Faith Lutheran has been doing lots of ministry on-line. We are so thankful for the digital tools that allow us to do that. What we cannot do is send bread and wine over the internet! Some people have asked if we can offer it some other way during this quarantine, especially since some churches are offering communion in different ways. That raises some big theological questions about the sacrament. Here are four issues that inform the thinking of many Lutheran churches today.

“This Is My Body”

Lutherans believe Christ’s body and blood are *really present* in Holy Communion. Jesus declared, “This *is* my body; this *is* my blood.” How that can be is a mystery of God’s grace, but we trust it is a *real* presence, not an imaginary one. That makes the word “this” as important as the word “is.” It is not just any bread or wine in any place, but *this* bread and wine, on the altar, where Christ is truly present. To separate the promise from that specific bread and wine cuts against the *reality* of Christ’s presence.

The Body of Christ

The Bible defines the Church as the Body of Christ, the people whom God graciously gathers into one body, with Christ as the Head. The name Holy Communion refers to this body, or community, of believers meeting Christ at His table. Unlike Holy Baptism, which never needs repeating, communion is the Church’s family meal, meant to be shared together again and again. To try to administer the sacrament when the Body of Christ is not together works against its communal nature.

The Purpose of Holy Communion

Since we cannot be together right now, some churches see this as an emergency that requires unusual methods of administering Holy Communion, but in Lutheran theology, there is no *emergency* need for it. The sacrament brings God’s Word home to each of us, but it does not add an element that is otherwise missing. Christians who are baptized and hearing God’s Word receive the fullness of the Gospel.

In 1523, Martin Luther wrote to some Christians who had no pastors to serve them. In that emergency situation, he said, “It would be safer and more wholesome for the father of the household to read the gospel and...to baptize those who are born in his home, ... even if throughout life they did not dare or could not receive Holy Communion. For Holy Communion is not so necessary that salvation depends on it. The gospel and baptism are sufficient, since faith alone justifies and love alone lives rightly.”

In saying that, Luther was not downplaying the importance of Holy Communion! His advice was only for a specific, very unusual situation, but it suggests that in our specific, very unusual situation, it is enough for us to cling to our baptism and God’s Word until we can gather again to receive the Lord’s Supper.

Looking at the Past

Years ago, many Lutherans rarely received Holy Communion, often just twice a year. Not too long ago, having communion once a month was considered cutting-edge practice. Luther’s *Small Catechism* urges Christians to commune at least four times a year, indicating that people also rarely communed in his day. That does not mean that it was the best practice. No doubt, it was not! It only shows that Christians have had varying views on how often we need to receive it. Strangely enough, not receiving communion during the stay-at-home restrictions is actually more in line with past practice than our normal practice.

Holy Communion in a Time of Covid-19

For these and other reasons, Faith Lutheran does not plan to administer Holy Communion in any unusual way. If the quarantine persists, that may change. We long for the day when the congregation can gather again and receive Holy Communion together. What a glorious day that will be! Until then, rest assured that God’s Word is sufficient to grant you forgiveness of sin, hold you securely in faith and keep you solidly grounded in the covenant of your baptism in Christ Jesus, our Lord.