

Matthew 26:20 When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve... ²⁶While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." ²⁷Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. ²⁸This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."

1 Corinthians 11:23 I [Paul] received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

²⁷Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.

Dear Friends in Christ,

THE THREE UNIONS JESUS PUT IN HOLY COMMUNION

You ever stop and look around in the middle of a meal? Not when you are eating alone, of course, but when you are eating with a bunch of people, family or friends. You stop thinking about the food and even the conversation, and you look at the people. People you know, whose company you enjoy. You are amazed to think how you all came to this meal. All from different places, on different trajectories, to different destinations, but for this moment you are together. And you thank God for the mental snapshot you just took.

Ever do that?

What do you think Jesus saw when he looked around in that upper room with his twelve closest? What *he* perceived, I don't know. I mean, I can never pretend to know what went on in Jesus' mind, so far above me is he, so perfect and so without the stain of sin. While I might not know what he perceived, from the Sacred Record we do know quite a bit of what he saw.

In that moment, Jesus saw twelve men who had heard but not put into practice his lesson about child-like humility. As the pressure of impending death weighed heavily on Jesus' last meal, those twelve had least one argument about who of them was the greatest. It wasn't just an argument. It was shown in their actions. As they prepared to eat, these twelve with the dirtied dustied feet of sandaled pedestrians, stubbornly waited each for the other to get down to the foot washing. "That's below my pay grade!" each thought. So

stubbornly did they refuse that finally their Master stripped down to his skivvies to do the foot washing. Throughout the evening meal they kept asking simple questions of things Jesus had covered before—and these are the twelve Jesus was relying on to take the Gospel to the world! As Jesus looked at them, he saw one whose heart had long ago left the room. He could see that clearly. Jesus knew the great harm that man would do. Yet Jesus was civil with him to the end, saying, *“What you are about to do, do quickly.”* He looked at another, one with moments of brilliance and then again with moments of something near foolishness. Jesus saw a potentially fatal flaw and warned Peter. But Peter scoffed at Jesus as some hand-wringing mother who should worry about people who need to be worried about.

What Jesus saw wasn't all negative.

Jesus also saw twelve who had their good moments. They had said, “You are the Christ, the Son of God,” and “Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” They had given up a lot to follow him—a lot! And they were willing to give up more. He saw that.

In that upper room, Jesus could also see the future. We know that from the prayer he prayed. He saw that in future days these twelve would be hard-pressed and persecuted because of his name. For a while they would be together. Strength in numbers would make it easier to stand. But they would eventually go out to individual callings. This Upper Room fellowship would be scattered to the four corners of the world. There they would be spat upon, imprisoned, beaten; each meeting their individual martyred ends. The believers they would in turn gather about the cross of Jesus would in most times and places be a minority, sometimes tolerated, sometimes hated, always misunderstood—whether in ancient Palestine or in more recent times and closer places. In that upper room Jesus saw not only those twelve men, he also saw us. He saw us, so similar to the ones before him, warts and all.

Jesus had given them God's Word of grace and forgiveness. And these men, by the Father's grace and the Holy Spirit's guidance, would remember them. But they and we are flesh and blood. While the Word is enough, the human mind begins to play tricks, and questions arise. Soon we start to hear Satan whispering his first words to the human mind, “Did God really say?”

Jesus saw them and us and the troubles common to humanity. He loved them and us and wanted to give them and us more than just words, so he ***“took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take and eat; this is my body.’ Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’”*** And here it is!

This thing he did, we call The Lord's Supper, we also rightly call Holy Communion. In the word Communion is a smaller word that explains this mystery. It is the word union. The strength of our Lord's Supper lies in three unions that Jesus sealed and seared into this bread and fruit of the vine.

I. Jesus tells us the first of the unions in his own words. Before I read it, I must insist that you understand I am quoting the words of our Savior from his own mouth. This is not a book of Lutheran doctrine. Jesus declared the first union of Communion when he said, ***“Take and eat; this is my body... Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood.”*** These physical elements when used in conjunction with his words are not just bread and wine. Contained in it is what Christ’s divine nature assumed to save us—body and blood, sacrificed on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. We call this union the doctrine of the Real Presence. Based on Christ’s clear words, we assert that we receive Christ’s body and blood together with the bread and wine.

For a good long time, people outside the Church (that’s to be expected) and people inside the Church (that’s not to be expected), have declared that this doctrine is irrational. “It doesn’t make sense,” they say. “It doesn’t look like, smell like, taste like flesh and blood. Put it under a microscope and you won’t see any such thing on a cellular level. It can’t be!” Tripped up by their human reason, even many Christians say that this bread and wine merely represent or remind us of the body and the blood of Christ.

I can understand why they say that. I really can. But here is the thing: the only thing more difficult than accounting for Jesus literally meaning what he said when he said ***“This is my body...”***—the only thing more difficult is to discount, to dismiss what Jesus said. If you object to the clear meaning of Jesus’ clear words, then what you have to do is walk into that upper room as Jesus institutes his holy supper, and you have to interrupt Jesus and say, “No, no, no, Jesus! Don’t say that! What you really meant to say is...” That is skating on pretty thin ice! Jesus said what he said. He meant what he meant. He gave his disciples a real gift, not a noble sentiment. In this bread and wine he unites it with body and blood.

II. Because of the first union that Christ declared in Holy Communion, we are assured of a second union, that is, Christ’s union with us.

If, as some say, all we have is a representation of Christ’s body and blood, then it becomes our job to do the work. It is our duty to spiritually ascend to the heights of heaven to be united with God. But that’s not the way it is. Communion doesn’t tell us to do something.

Nor does this rely on working ourselves up to a certain emotional state. It’s not like worship leaders of so many places who declare that they are ushering you into the presence of God. What Christ offers here is not the manipulating of emotions. It is a gift. It is simple bread and wine placed into your hand with the word of Christ echoing in your ear. This union is based on the promise of Christ and his objectively true acts of living and dying for you.

Christ condescends to these physical elements; he makes the journey. He comes to you to be united with you. As you stand at the altar, wafer placed in your hand, wine offered to you, Christ communes with you.

This is the right place for communion with God. It is the right place because it centers

us in Jesus' death for us. It teaches us that the center of our faith must always be on the forgiveness of our sins. In Communion Christ gives himself to us that we might be strengthened for our pilgrimage through this world.

III. There is a third union. This union is based on what is found already in verse 20: *“When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve.”* Jesus gathered a group to institute Holy Communion, and that is its intention. This is most vividly illustrated when Jesus said, *“Drink from it, all of you.”* Jesus could have said, “Each of you,” but he didn't. He said “all of you.” This does not prohibit people from receiving communion individually as, for example, in a shut-in visit. But Christ's design for Communion is to create a space to unite and build up his people.

Imagine what it was like for Peter, James and John and the rest, as they celebrated the Lord's Supper down through the years. As they offered the bread and wine to new groups of believers, how could their minds not return to that amazing night before Jesus' death? They remembered that night when Jesus saw them for who they were, and gave them this meal to draw them, those bickering disciples, together. Now those apostles were drawing together others around the Sacrament.

Christ wants his people to come together as equals, rich and poor, smart and challenged, young and old, and to realize that they stand before their Savior as equally beloved, equally forgiven. In Communion the differences melt away and we are united in this sacred act. We are united in Christ.

This is right. As Christians, we are strangers in this world. Faith is a bond that you have with all the rest of us in this building. It is a bond you do not have with so many of the faces in your lives. We need this third union of Communion to strengthen us as Christ's Church.

Being reminded of these three unions, does this not lead us to hunger for the Sacrament? Does this not make us ashamed of those Sunday mornings when we saw the altar furnishings, realized it was a communion Sunday, and we lamented, “Oh no, a long service today.” Knowing the blessings Christ gives here, does this not make us want to corral our minds during the distribution, so that our thoughts do not wander, but savor what Christ gives us? Does the miracle of these three unions not make us renew our commitment to Jesus, to go out after a Communion service in a renewed sense of purpose in the world and value before God?

Realize the what Christ here gives. Realize it! Treasure it! Amen.