

## St. Andrew Evangelical Lutheran Church

Rev. Christopher Raiford, Pastor

" Take and Eat – Take and Drink " Matthew 26:26-28

Thursday April 9, 2020 – Maundy Thursday

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ.

So here we are again, at the most significant, most sacred weekend in our worship life as Christians. Here we are again in spirit in the upper room, at the foot of the cross, and—wonder of wonders—staring into the empty tomb where Jesus of Nazareth is not. This weekend, again, is truly the high point of our worship life.

But with us not able to gather together for fellowship and worship during this time of separation, I feel like I have been missing something this Lenten season. Oh yeah! I know what it is! What's missing are the midweek gathering around the Word of God with snacks/soup & sandwich/ hot dishes. It's gathering together for fellowship and the breaking of bread together.

When we do that think about what happens there in the fellowship hall. We gather as one big family in Christ. We talk over a meal. We share joys; we share concerns; we share sorrows and trials. We share encouragements and Bible passages and promises to pray for one another. We serve one another; we either bring food to share or perhaps some money to share so that this good thing—this comfortable meal, this fellowship—can keep going. There's a lot more happening during that type of fellowship than just eating. Then again, that's the way it is at family meals, right?

But tonight we are the guests. We are the ones being served; everything is prepared. Tonight there is an even higher level of intimacy, a higher level of fellowship, and greater blessings than just a good meal with good friends. Tonight our Lord Jesus Christ himself, the friend of sinners, invites us each to come and feast with him. It is a banquet that, this side of heaven, is without compare.

The words of his invitation are familiar:

***While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave 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."***

In St. Luke's account of the Last Supper, the Holy Spirit adds this wonderful detail in the words of Jesus: ***"I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer"*** (Lk 22:15). Really? Sitting around a table with men who time and time again over the past few years had shown they understood very little of what he was trying to teach them? ***"Eagerly desired***

*..."* Really? With a group of disciples who would completely abandon him in the Garden of Gethsemane only a few hours after this . . . and he knew it? ***"With you . . ."*** Really? Even though just shortly before this they had been jostling and elbowing for positions around the table, verbally sparring and bantering about which one of them showed the most promise and which one of them would be the most indispensable for the kingdom of God's march forward?

A motley crew was gathered there in the upper room, don't you think? Where were the women of the gospels who so faithfully followed Jesus in his ministry and supported his work? Where was Mary, the sister of Martha, who seemed to understand Jesus' teachings on a much higher level than the disciples gathered in that room?

Be all that as it may, the words of Jesus remain: ***"I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you."*** In the kingdom of God, it doesn't matter much who are the guests; what matters is who is the host. And the host is our Savior, the friend of sinners. He ate with the Twelve, men of little faith and slow to understand. He ate with Zaccheus, the scam artist. He ate with other tax collectors too—and prostitutes and sinners and lepers.

I find immense comfort in the fact that Jesus "eagerly desired" to eat with his disciples, weak and sinful men as they were, because I so often see myself in them. St. Paul tells us that a person ought to examine himself before he partakes of the meal (1 Co 11:28), but that is painful, isn't it? I look in that mirror of God's law and see only sin and death. I see failure after failure. I see weakness, my tripping over the same old traps of Satan. Worse, I see defiance—that sinful nature rearing its ugly head in my life and defiantly telling God, "No, God! I'm going to do this anyway! I don't care what you say!" I see myself trying to be God—my own master—who says with clenched teeth, "My will be done!" But all this stumbling, all this weakness, all this defiance does not bring me either the control I want or the freedom I'm chasing or the peace and happiness I desire. It brings unrest. It brings despair. It brings judgment. This is, St. Paul says, a ***"body that is subject to death"*** (Ro 7:24). And he is right.

In the mirror of God's law, I am forced to see so many things about myself that only lead me to this conclusion: This holy meal is not for me.

Yet Jesus says, "Come!" Our loving Father could not turn away from his fallen world. He sent his Son, his only Son. His Son obeyed and joyfully came. The quiet setting of the upper room must have seemed a million miles away from the horrors of the

next day. Yet as surely as time marches on, Good Friday would come and the Son of Man would go, just as it was written about him. It was all coming to a head now—God’s great, grand plan of salvation. And not just the cross—this too is part of that plan: a heavenly meal for sinners.

I cannot understand it, why Jesus would say to me, **“Take and eat. . . . Take and drink. . . .”** But he has, and he still does. He desires for you to eat and drink with him and rejoices to see you here. Don’t doubt it! This is a meal for sinners, one and all. As with any meal, the host writes and controls the guest list. Are you a sinner who knows all too well your sins and who hangs your head over them? You’re on the list. Come! The Lord himself has invited you.

And then, when I not only consider the marvelous truth that he wants me to come to this meal, I am equally astounded by what he gives me at this meal. He eagerly desires my presence so that he can graciously give me his presents!

They are presents; they are gifts of grace without compare. That treasured book of ours, Luther’s catechism, says it so succinctly: *“forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation . . . . For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.”*

Here in this meal your Savior forgives you your sins. Just as a creative spouse finds various and different ways to say “I love you” besides just words, the same is true of our Savior. Yes, he says “I love you, I forgive you” on the pages of his Word, but he does here too, as well in the water of Baptism. Here we can taste; here we can see that the Lord is good. He touches other senses besides our ears and eyes. This bread and wine on your lips brings you your Savior’s true body and blood.

And this is the blood of the new covenant. The old covenant was the law, and it could not save; it could only condemn and kill. But here, in the body and blood of Christ, is the new covenant, announced long ago by the prophet Jeremiah: **“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel. . . . I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more”** (31:33,34). The old covenant called for holiness and death for all who were not holy. The new covenant was established by death, by the death of the Holy One, and through faith in this new covenant, God covers you with the holiness of his Son. This new covenant is not a bargain you make with God or a “meet ya halfway” kind of deal that Americans love. This is God doing for us what we cannot even begin to do for ourselves. It is a one-sided covenant; it is God doing everything and then freely giving it all away to those who believe. It is a covenant of grace and a gift beyond price.

What’s more, at this meal Jesus also gives the gift of unity. We all come here from different walks of life. We are men; we are women; we are young; we are old. We are in different income brackets. We are from different ethnic backgrounds. We are healthy; we are sick. We are joyful; we are sad. But we come to

this holy feast as equals. We kneel next to one another as a family in Christ. We all receive the same bread, the same wine. And through this meal God not only binds us to himself all the more closely, but he also binds us to one another. He does that so we can share this time of grace together in the bond of peace—working together, sharing joys and burdens, praying for and encouraging one another. In short, loving one another deeply—the very thing Jesus said would let the outside world know that we are truly his disciples.

And, finally, with eyes of faith we can see and understand all of this in this Supper—right here at [name of church]. This gift lifts our eyes above all the noise and racket and mess of this world to see where we’re headed, to see our true home.

All this! All this . . . . How blessed we are to gather here tonight and be reminded of these things. And even though our fellowship meals in the fellowship hall have been wonderful, and we will have many, many, more in the future, they pale in comparison to what happens when the friend of sinners says, **“Take and eat; take and drink.”** Amen.