

MT. ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

April 18th, 2019 / Maundy Thursday

Matthew 26:26-28

TAKE & EAT – TAKE & DRINK!

Pastor Steven L. Neumann

So here we are again, at the most sacred weekend in our worship life as Christians; these next few days are certainly very special to us.

But it's not uncommon to hear a bit of sadness about Lent being almost over too. Why? Well, for one, it means the end of our weekly Lenten suppers.

That may seem a bit trite; but is it? Think about what happens at those suppers. We gather as family in Christ. We talk over a meal. We share joys & concerns. We serve one another. There's a lot more happening than just eating good food - although we certainly do that! Then again, that's how it is at a family meal, right? Lots of good things happen there!

Tonight, we're all guests at a family meal; we are all being served. Everything is prepared; & here, there is an even higher level of intimacy, fellowship, & greater blessings than just a good meal with friends. Tonight Jesus invites us to come & feast with Him at a banquet that, on this side of heaven, is without compare; He does so with TWO related 3 word statements of truth: *'Take & eat – take & drink.'*

In Luke's account of the Last Supper, the Holy Spirit says that Jesus told His disciples in that Upper Room: *"I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer"* (22:15). Really?

Sitting at a table with these disciples the past few years had shown just how little they understood about what Jesus was teaching them! They bickered constantly about which of them was greatest; they'd even been elbowing for positions around this table, verbally sparring & bantering about which of them showed the most promise & would be the most indispensable for God's kingdom going forward. As we see it, we want to ask Jesus: *'You eagerly desired to eat this meal with these disciples, Lord – really - knowing one of them would betray you, another would deny you, & all the rest would abandon you?'*

Yes, what a motley crew was gathered in the upper room, don't you think? Nevertheless, Jesus' words stand: *"I have eagerly desired to eat ... with you;"* & what comfort they bring! For they remind us that in God's kingdom, the focus isn't on the guests; what matters is the host. And the host is Jesus, the friend of sinners. He ate with 12 men of *'little faith'* who were slow to get it. He broke bread with Zaccheus, the cheating tax collector. He dined with prostitutes, lepers, & other *'great sinners'* too.

I find immense comfort in Jesus saying that He *"eagerly desired"* to eat with these weak & sinful people; for I often see myself in them. The Spirit through St. Paul tells us that a person must *'examine themselves'* before they partake of Jesus' holy meal (1 Co 11:28); but that's painful to do – isn't it? For as I look in that mirror of God's law, I don't like what I see. I see failure after failure - me tripping into the same old traps of Satan over & over. Worse yet, at times I see defiance - my sinful nature rearing its ugly head & telling God: "No! I'm going to do this anyway; I don't care what you say!" I see myself trying to be my own master, who says to God through clenched teeth, "MY will be done!"

But sadly, I also see that all my stumbling, all my weakness, & all my defiance doesn't bring me either the control I want, the freedom I chase, or the peace & happiness I desire! It brings unrest, despair & judgment; it brings hell! Yes, examining myself in the mirror of God's law forces me to see so many sad things about myself; it only leads me to one conclusion: This holy meal isn't for me; I'm unworthy of it!

Yet knowing all that & knowing you & I all too well, Jesus still says, "Come!" I can't understand why He would say to me: *"Take & eat. . . . Take & drink?"* But He has; & thankfully He still does! Yes, He's eager for you & I to eat & drink with Him; He rejoices to see us here. Remember, as with any meal, the host controls the guest list - it's all up to Him; & Jesus, the host, wants you here!

Are you a sinner who knows all too well your sins & who hangs your head in shame over them? Well, that's who this meal is for. Do you believe that Jesus your Savior has forgiven all your sins? You're on the list; come - the Lord Jesus Himself has invited you! For here He has something unbelievable – something especially prepared for you in your lost & sin-sick state. Yes, Jesus eagerly desires your presence at His meal, so that He can graciously give you His presents here, you might say!

And indeed, they are presents; they're gifts of grace without compare. Our treasured Lutheran book, Luther's catechism, says so succinctly what the presents are that Jesus gives in His meal: namely, *"forgiveness of sins, life, & salvation . . . for where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life & salvation."* Yes, here in His own special meal, our Savior forgives all our sins, & assures us that He has secured our salvation.

Just as a creative spouse finds different ways to say "I love you," the same is true of our Savior, Jesus. Yes, He says "I love & forgive you" on the pages of His Word; but He also does so here in baptism's cleansing waters.

He also does so here at His altar, where we literally get to taste & see that our Lord is good, in the simple bread & wine miraculously united to His body & blood in His holy meal. For here we receive *the blood of the new covenant*, Jesus says.

The old covenant is the law. It couldn't save; it only condemned & killed. But here in the body & blood of Christ is the new covenant, declared long ago by God's prophet Jeremiah: "*This is the covenant I will make with the people...I will forgive their wickedness, & remember their sins no more*" (31:33,34). It's pure gospel!

The old covenant called for holiness from all; it also called for death for all who weren't holy! The new covenant was established by death - the death of the only Holy One: Jesus, the perfect lamb of God; & by faith, God in this new covenant covers you with Jesus' holiness, & gives you life eternal.

This new covenant is not a "meet ya' halfway" kind of deal like Americans love - you do part & I'll do part; no, this is a 1-sided covenant, with God doing it all - including giving it away free of charge by His Spirit's creation of faith. Yes, this is a new covenant of pure grace - a gift beyond measure!

What's more, at this meal Jesus also gives His gift of unity. We all come here from different walks of life. We're different genders, ages, ethnic backgrounds. We have different financial situations, health issues, & life struggles & joys. But we come to this table as equals. We stand next to one another as family in Christ. We receive the same saving meal here; & through it, God not only binds us closer to Himself, but also to one another. He does that so we can share this time of grace in life together in peace - working together, sharing our joys & burdens, praying for & encouraging one another - in short, actively loving one another - the very thing Jesus on this night said would show the outside world that we are truly His disciples.

Finally, in this precious meal, Jesus lifts our eyes above the noise & mess of this world to see where we're going - that we're headed to our true home with Jesus 1-day. The Scandinavian Lutherans had it right in their church designs. Almost all their churches have curved, semi-circular communion rails; but it's only a half circle. For as they'll tell you, there's an invisible other half to that circle; it's in the church of heaven that we can't yet see. They believe that as Jesus' followers on earth gather at their half-circle communion table, all the hosts of heaven are gathered on the other side at theirs. Thus, the whole church on earth & in heaven gathers in a circle around the central throne of Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!

Yes, in this meal, we enter into the presence of the eternal King of kings - that much is true; & it is a foretaste of the banquet we'll enjoy with Him & His for all eternity - no doubt about it! What a gift!

How blessed we are to gather here tonight to be reminded of these things. Here is the culmination of all our Lenten dining. And even though our meals downstairs have been wonderful the past 6 weeks, they pale in comparison to what will happen here tonight, & what happens every time Jesus the friend of sinners says, "*Take & eat; take & drink.*" What gifts He gives us! May we receive them often! Amen.