

“We give thanks to You, almighty God, that You have refreshed us through this salutary gift, and we implore You that of Your mercy You would strengthen us through the same in faith toward You and in fervent love toward one another; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.”

This prayer should be very, very familiar to you. It is the standard post-communion collect, suggested in every single divine service setting of the Lutheran Service Book. Yes, there are alternative prayers also suggested. And I sometimes use them. But this one is suggested in all of them. It is suggested in all of them because it was written by Martin Luther himself.

Saying a prayer of thanksgiving and blessing immediately after Holy Communion is a practice that goes back to the 1<sup>st</sup> c. A.D., during the time of the apostles. The medieval Roman Catholic church had a list of post-communion prayers to use, one for every Sunday of the church year. I'm not entirely sure why Luther decided to replace those with a single common prayer to use at every service, but it kind of makes sense. Luther generally liked simplifying the divine service and making it more accessible. And so he wrote this prayer.

And it's one of those prayers that you say so often that you don't realize how beautiful and well-written it really is. Because it states so perfectly the three reasons why we receive the Lord's Supper. The three blessings we hope to take from it.

The first, right at the very beginning is obvious to any Lutheran and probably the one we are most familiar with. “We give thanks to You, almighty God, that You have refreshed us through this salutary gift.” The Lord's Supper is a source of refreshment.

Today, in our Gospel lesson, we hear about an event that is not the Last Supper, but it did take place immediately prior to the Last Supper. And I've preached before about the wonderful connection between these two events. Because the Lord's Supper is when Jesus washes our feet.

Have you ever been on your feet, walking a long distance, for a very long time? My family goes to Disney World fairly often and a day at Disney World is just brutal on your feet. By the end of the day, they are filthy with sweat, sore from walking, roasting from the Florida heat. And my favorite thing in the world to do is fill a bath tub with several inches of ice cold water, stick my feet in, and let them soak. And instantly I feel better all over. Not just my feet. My whole body is refreshed in that moment.

That is what the Lord's Supper does for us. It washes off the grime of sin. It heals our sore muscles. It feeds our very soul. It refreshes us, like someone washing our feet after a long day.

It is a “salutary gift.” The word “salutary” doesn't get used much in English anymore. But the German word that Luther used there means “healing,” “wholesome,” “life-giving.” It is a gift that heals our wounds. That feeds us with something more wholesome and nourishing than anything the world can provide. When we feel like we're still dead in our sins, it tells us that because Jesus died, we are alive. He has given his life to us.

And, in that way, it does something more: it strengthens us in faith toward God. You know, Luther was once asked whether a person who was struggling with doubts should take communion. If you wonder about God's love for you? If you waver in your faith that Jesus really did die for your sins? If doubt of any kind is present in your mind, should you be receiving the Lord's Body and Blood?

To which Luther replied: Absolutely! Those are the people who have the most need of the Lord's Supper. And if those doubts cause them to stay home and not come to church, then their friends should show up at their house and drag them to church. Because the Lord's Supper is a gift for them.

It is a means by which God strengthens faith. Christ unites himself to us. Abides with us, as he says in John 6, through eating his flesh and drinking his blood. And he does not lose those who have been given to him. He gives life to their soul. Life to their faith through the Spirit.

And this is the point at which I feel like we just kind of disengage from Luther's post-communion prayer. Because these are the two aspects of Holy Communion that are most emphasized in our doctrine. Or, at least, in our catechism classes. The Lord's Supper gives you forgiveness of sins and the Lord's Supper gives you faith. And this is all between you and God and no one else.

But it's not. And Luther points that out. "We implore You that of Your mercy you would strengthen us... in fervent love toward one another." Now, in one sense, this shouldn't be surprising. Because this is just a reiteration of the two tables of the Law. How do we summarize the ten commandments? Love God and love your neighbor. What does Luther want the Lord's Supper to do for us? Strengthen us in love for God and love for our neighbor. Makes sense.

But he doesn't just say, "love for our neighbor." He says, "love for one another." As in, the people sitting next to you. Praying this prayer with you. And the love that he describes is not just a general, wishy washy love for all of humanity. It's a fervent love. In German, it's a "burning" love. We are imploring God that through this Holy Supper, he would give us an intense love for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Because that is, indeed, another blessing of the Lord's Supper.

This Epistle reading for this evening, where Paul discusses the Lord's Supper, it comes from 1 Corinthians 11. But what do we find immediately following this passage in 1 Corinthians 12? *"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ... If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."*

To receive the Body of Christ is to become part of the Body of Christ. To be united with Christ in the Sacrament is to be united with each other in the Sacrament. To abide with Christ through the eating of his flesh and the drinking of his blood is to abide with one another. To have true fellowship with each other.

It's no wonder that Paul is so horrified by the Communion practices of the Corinthian church. This is supposed to be an act of unity and they have turned it into an act of division. They have used this wonderful opportunity to be one body in Christ as an opportunity to eat and drink with no consideration at all for the brothers and sisters in the faith who haven't arrived yet. They have despised the church of God by their actions, and so they have despised Christ himself. For the Church is His Body.

To kneel at this table together is to declare that we are at peace. That we have been given peace with God and that we have made peace with one another. This is something that's often misunderstood about the handshake of peace. Churches today often use the handshake of peace as simply an opportunity to say, "Good morning," or "Good evening," or "Nice to meet you." It's just a time for greeting.

But in the early church, where the kiss of peace originated, it was not simply a time for greeting one another. It was a time for the congregation to declare and confirm that their were no outstanding sins that needed to be resolved. No grudges. No bitterness. You went to each brother or sister in Christ, and you said to them, "God's peace to you." And they agreed, "Yes, God's peace to you as well." And you knew, you were at peace with each other.

Or, maybe you weren't. Maybe there was division there. Maybe there was a sin that needed to be confessed and forgiven. Maybe there was an old hurt that had never been addressed. That's not a good thing. But it's a whole lot better that it's out in the open, than that it's festering inside. Because now that it's out in the open, these two believers can be reconciled. And the unity of the church can be restored by restoring each other in love.

"Strengthen us... in fervent love toward one another." Strengthen us with love for each other just as you strengthen us with love for you and faith in your Son. Strengthen us through this salutary, healing, wholesome, life-giving gift, to be your body, fed your body. To be your people, cleansed and forgiven. That we may forgive as you have forgiven us. And be refreshed to serve you together. Amen.