

“The Communion of Empty Hands”

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Christ Lutheran Church

Menomonie, Wisconsin

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from our triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It is Maundy Thursday, the night in which Jesus was betrayed, the night in which, for the time it took to eat supper, the light of grace flared into holy brilliance before it was snuffed out, like a candle on the dinner table, by betrayal, suffering and death leaving the disciples and everyone in the world imprisoned in deepest darkness and despair.

Tonight, at the end of the service, we will strip the altar and indeed the sanctuary leaving it bare and empty as a tomb awaiting corpse. After we have shared the Lord’s Supper, the meal that Christ commanded us to remember every day, but most especially on this night.

We leave with only suffering and death before us, except for what we carry inside us – the bread, the wine, the body and blood, and the grace of God. We, too, have been stripped down, pared to the bone, to the flesh, to the soul. In truth we face the horrors of Good Friday and the despair of Easter Saturday with only our faith to sustain us.

That got me thinking: What what must this sacrament we will share, this Last Supper, this gift of grace, what might it look like? How might we experience this meal if we were literally stripped bare – of freedom, of family, no belongings and possessions, lacking even the possibility of a future? What if we actually came to the Supper, as Luther emphatically says we do, as nothing more than beggars?

Thomas G. Pettepiece in *Visions of a World Hungry*, gives us a glimpse of just such a service of The Lord’s Supper. The setting is a prison in country were most political viewpoints and religious faith are crimes against the State. Christians and atheists alike find themselves behind bars, living in cold and stench with nothing but the clothes on their backs, ragged and filthy.

One man in this prison, a pastor, says: My crime was my faith. I was a subversive, they said. My preaching and my beliefs threatened the regime. But next to me sits a man who is a mechanic What is subversive about repairing machinery? Yet here we, and hundreds of others struggle to survive each day.

Many of us here have already heard that we have lost our homes, our furniture and belongings, our cars – everything we owned is gone. Our families are broken up. Our children wander the streets alone, father in one prison, mother in another. And perhaps the greatest

pain of all – it happened so fast, none of us had a chance to say goodbye to our loved ones.

In here, there is not even a cup. A single ladle in the hand of one of the guards serves us water and thin gruel once or twice a day. And yet, dozens of us experience the joy of celebrating communion – without bread or wine. The communion of empty hands.

The non-Christians among us said: “We will help you; we will talk quietly so that you can meet.” They gave us a great gift. For if everyone had suddenly fallen silent for communion, it would have alerted the guards as surely as if I had stood up and started preaching at the top of my lungs.

So I told the those gathered for the Lord’s Supper, “We have no bread, no even water to use in place of wine. But we will act as though we had.

This meal in which we take part, I said, reminds us of the prison, the torture, the death and the final victory of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The bread is the body which he gave for humanity. The fact that we have no bread represents very well the lack of bread in the real hunger of so many millions of human beings. The wine, which we don’t have today, is his blood and represents our dream of a united humanity and a just society, without difference of race and class.

I held out my empty hand to the first person on my right, and place it over his open hand, and each one of us did likewise with the person next to us: “Take and eat, this is my body which is given for you; do this for the remembrance of me.” Afterward, all of us raised our hands to our mouths, receiving the body of Christ in silence.

Then I said: take, drink, this is the blood of Christ which was shed to seal the new covenant of God with all people. Let us give thanks, sure that Christ is here with us, strengthening us. We gave thanks to God, and finally stood up and embraced each other.

A while later another non-Christian prisoner said to me: “You people have something special which I would like to have.” The father of a dead girl, killed in the repression, came up to me and said: “Pastor, this was a real experience! I believe that today I am on the road.”

The communion of empty hands. Is that not what Communion is about? Indeed is it no what the days to follow are all about? That even as Jesus emptied himself, he was feeding us? Was not, in truth, the “real experience” the grieving father referred to the real presence of Christ in the bread and wine? And is it not so, even tonight.

We have a hymn that proclaims, “We come to hungry feast hungry . . . for the word, for the food we lack, for the health we lack, for the relationships and unity that elude our frantic grasping, for the freedom of forgiveness that only God provides. We come, in other words, as beggars, not worthy of a scrap that that falls on the floor of His table. And yet he offers us *everything*.”

You’ve heard of the 30-second, or 10 or 5-second rule? Food picked up from the floor within 30 seconds after its dropping is still edible. God’s rule for that is not measured in seconds, but in eternity. No matter how long we have been down on the floor, in the gutter, stuck in prisons, or others- or our own-making, God lifts up not the food, but us. He places us back at the table, and feeds us.

To do this universe-shaking thing, he emptied himself, on this night he showed the disciples and us that he like the bread was broken, he like the wine was poured out. On this night, he would leave the light of the table for the darkness of the garden, the jail, cross and the tomb.

In Christ, we are fed with all we need, by his empty hands. Faith in this truth will sustain sustained and freed those prisoners, though they remained behind bars, still threatened by hunger and death. So it sustains us in our hungry lives on the road to Easter morning – and every morning.. Amen.

