Matthew 26:26-28 (EHV)  
Maundy Thursday 2019

So here we are again, at the most significant, most sacred weekend in our worship life as Christians. 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 is truly the high point of our worship life.

But some view this time with a bit of sadness. Why? Because this means the end of our weekly Lenten suppers. That may seem to be a trite observation. But is it? Think about what happens there each week. We gather as one big family in Christ. We talk over a meal. We share joys, concerns, 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 is a lot more happening during the church supper on Wednesday nights than just eating. Then again, that is 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 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 fr it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

With these two THREE WORDS OF TRUTH, Jesus tells us he eagerly desires your presence and here Jesus graciously gives you his presents.

In 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. Really? Sitting around a table with men who time and time again over the past few years had shown they didn’t always understand what he was trying to teach them? Eagerly desired? 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?

Says: with you. Really? Even though just shortly before this they had been jostling for positions around the table, arguing which of them was the greatest.

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 and supported his work? Where was Mary, the sister of Martha, who seemed to understand Jesus’ teachings so much better than the disciples gathered in that room? We do not know if they were present.

No matter. The words of Jesus remain: I have eagerly desired to eat this passover with you. In the kingdom of God, it does not 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 those men of little faith and slow to understand. He ate with Zaccheus, the tax-collecting cheat. He ate with other tax-collectors too, as well as prostitutes and sinners and lepers.
I find a lot of 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: Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup, 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, 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 am chasing or the peace and happiness I desire. It brings unrest, despair, judgment. This is, Paul says, a body that's subject to death. 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 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 are on the list. Come! The Lord himself has invited you.

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 - gifts of grace without compare. Luther’s catechism, says it so succinctly: Forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation - for where there is forgiveness of sins, there’s 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 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. 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 halfwa kind of deal. 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 is 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 Trinity/St. John. This gift lifts our eyes above all the noise and mess of this world to see where we are headed, to see our true home. The Scandinavian Lutherans had it right in their church designs, many of which you can see scattered all over the Midwest. Most of those churches have a curved, semi-circular Communion rail. But it is only half a circle. For, as they will tell you, there is an invisible half to the circle - the church in heaven, which we cannot yet see. Here the saints on earth gather in their half-circle; there all the hosts of heaven gather in theirs. The whole church, on earth and in heaven, gathers in a circle around the central throne of the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world and who sits on the throne forever and ever. In this meal, we enter into the presence of the eternal King of kings.

All this! How blessed we are to gather here tonight and be reminded of these things. Here is the culmination of all our Lenten dining. And even tho our fellowship meals have been wonderful over the past few weeks, they pale in comparison to what will happen here tonight and what happens every time that Friend of sinners says: Take and eat; take and drink.

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