

April 1, 2021 – 1 Corinthians 10:16-17

When you think of the miracles of Jesus, what comes to mind? Maybe the feeding of the 5000? Calming the storm? Healing the blind man? Raising Lazarus from the dead?

Whatever it is, it's probably pretty dramatic. Pretty impressive. Pretty awe-inspiring. Because that's how Jesus' miracles were usually received by those who saw them. With utter amazement. And often with a fair amount of fear. Because, when you see something supernatural, it's usually pretty terrifying, even if it's something good.

But among the miracles we don't often think about is the miracle of the Lord's Supper. Which is odd. Because what goes on in the Lord's Supper is very much supernatural. Bread and wine becoming flesh and blood. If we heard it in a Bible story we would immediately point to it and say, "That's a miracle." And yet, not so much when it's on our own altar.

Maybe that's because it doesn't look like a miracle. There are no flashes of light or voices from heaven. In fact, there's nothing in our sensory perception that's changed regarding this bread and wine. It still tastes like very, very dry, bland crackers of baked flour and water. Like a very sweet red wine.

There's nothing different about them. In taste or smell or sight or texture. And, in fact, we would never argue that they cease to be bread and wine. They are just also, imperceptibly, flesh and blood.

But that's very much a statement of faith. And when dealing with statements of faith, it can be difficult to get everyone on the same page. Churches throughout the centuries have held many different views about what is going on in Holy Communion. And why we don't taste, smell, see, or feel anything different about the bread and wine used in this miracle we call a sacrament.

The Roman Catholic Church, for example, explained it away with Platonic philosophy. According to Plato, every object has an accident and a substance. The accident is what we taste, smell, see, and feel about an object. The substance is what the object really is. Therefore, if our senses could perceive past the accident of bread and wine in communion, we would find that the substance of it has been changed. Transubstantiated.

It's a nice theory. Luther himself acknowledged that transubstantiation might be true. Or it might not be. Because it has no basis in scripture. Which, honestly, the Roman Catholic Church really didn't care about anyway. Because in their theology of the Lord's Supper, the people who actually received communion really didn't matter much. It was the consecration of the elements that was what mattered most. Because that was where the priest re-sacrificed Christ every time.

Like the ancient Israelite priests at the temple, the sins of the people must be atoned for. Therefore, let's take the Lamb of God and nail him to a cross every Sunday. Never mind what Paul said about Christ's sacrifice being "once for all." We're gonna do it a million times for all, at churches all over the world. That'll make sure we're forgiven.

Yeah, Luther had some serious objections to that too. As did many of the other Reformers of his day and those who followed after him. Yet, they too had difficulty understanding this miracle that didn't look much like a miracle.

Ulrich Zwingli, for example, couldn't get his head around where Christ was at every moment. Christ had been incarnate on earth and then ascended into heaven and then sent His Holy Spirit to be with God's people. Everybody agreed on this. But then, if Christ is in heaven, how can he be here on the altar? He's gone. He's in heaven. And we're spiritual people, so why do we need physical flesh and blood at all. No, it just doesn't make sense.

So he decided that Christ's spirit was all that was there. That Christ was physically in heaven, but allowed a portion of his spirit to flow into the bread and wine at communion. So that our spirits could be strengthened by the spiritual representation of Christ's body and blood. It was all very spiritual.

Why Zwingli needed this complicated, wholly unscriptural theology, I'll never know. Jesus Christ is God after all. Can't he be in two places at once? I certainly hope so. And this whole idea of

Christ's spirit kind of oozing out of him has led more than a few Lutheran scholars to refer to Zwingli's theory as the "leaky Jesus" doctrine. But yet it persists in churches throughout the world.

Of course, Zwingli's much brighter protégé, John Calvin, saw the problems with his teacher's theories, and came up with one of his own in response. For as far as Calvin was concerned, why did we need to have Jesus' body and blood here at communion at all? Why not just avoid the whole messy subject by saying the entire thing was just a metaphor.

Jesus didn't mean, "This is my body. This is my blood." He meant, "This represents my body. This represents my blood." Paul didn't mean that we actually participate in the body and blood of Christ. He meant we metaphorically participate in the body and blood of Christ. John didn't mean we actually sit at the high feast of the Lamb. He meant we symbolically sit at the high feast of the Lamb.

I disagree. I disagree that eating and drinking the supper don't matter. I disagree that it's all about a spiritual presence with nothing physically changed. I disagree that it's all a bunch of metaphors. In fact, I disagree that we see nothing supernatural when we communion. Because we do see something in the miracle of communion. And no, it's maybe not as impressive as the blind regaining their sight, but it's significant nonetheless.

Because what we see in Holy Communion is the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy that has formed the theme for this entire Lenten series. *"Yet even now, declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster."*

That's exactly what the Lord's Supper is. It is us returning to the Lord. Returning to him with fasting and weeping and mourning. Returning to him with rent hearts, confessing our sinfulness. Returning to him in repentance for the ways that we have sinned in thought, word, and deed. For what we have done and by what we have left undone.

And then receiving from him his grace and mercy. Receiving from him not anger, but abundant steadfast love. Receiving from him peace when we deserve disaster.

Receiving from him participation with the Body and Blood of our Lord. That's an interesting Word, isn't it? Participation. The Greek word used there, "koinonia," has several ways it can be translated. The King James Version uses the word "communion," which is where the term "Holy Communion" came from. Other translations use the word "fellowship," just like members of a church has fellowship with one another.

And it is misunderstanding this participation, communion, and fellowship that is really at the root of all these doctrinal difference regarding the Lord's Supper. Because the point of this word isn't about understanding how the Lord is present with us. Just that he is present with us. Really and truly present.

As present as two people participating in a conversation. As present as he is sitting on his throne before the communion of saints in heaven. As present as the fellowship of this congregation right here, right now.

And that is a miracle. That the Son of God could be present among us sinners, alive and reigning for all eternity, even as he gives us his Body and Blood in, with, and under bread and wine. The same Body and Blood that died on the cross to forgive our sins.

That is a reason for awe and amazement. And even a bit of fear. Not because it's a bad thing. But because it's a truly supernatural thing being done right here in our midst. Feeding us like the 5000 were fed. Calming the storm of doubt and anxiety within our hearts. Healing our spiritual blindness, that we may see the good works that God has planned for us. And raising us from the death of sin to new life in the spirit.

The Lord's Supper is a miracle on our very own altar. That we may return to Lord, return to this place, and find him waiting and ready to receive us. Amen.