

It was a Communion Sunday, and among the visitors was a little, old lady who apparently had never been to a Lutheran Church. How could I tell? Coming out, she took me firmly by the hand, looked me square in the eye, and said, “There was wine in the Communion cup!” That was it. I couldn’t quite tell if she was scandalized or just aching to say, “Whoo-hoo!” But clearly, she thought it was the oddest thing in the world. “There was wine in the Communion cup!”

And yes, there was – just like there was at the Last Supper. But there was also much more in that cup, and there still is today – such benefits that it’s no wonder St. Paul called it the **Cup of Blessing**. We don’t often talk about Holy Communion and its benefits, but Maundy Thursday seems a good time to do that – a good time not only because this is the day when Holy Communion was instituted, but because the contents of the Cup of Blessing depend entirely on Jesus’ accepting another cup on Maundy Thursday: the cup of suffering He prayed about in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Do you remember that scene? When the Last Supper was over, Jesus and the disciples had come to the garden, just as they had many times before to pray and reflect on God’s will. But this time things were different. While the others struggled to stay awake, Jesus struggled with something infinitely harder: the fate which had brought Him into this world; the fate which was about to come down upon Him. That’s why Jesus had gone off by Himself to pray. For this was no prissy, perfunctory prayer. It was prayer so intense He sweat blood. Throwing Himself on the ground, Jesus cried out, **“My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not My will but Your will be done.”**

There in that Garden of Gethsemane, the divine and human sides of Jesus engaged in bitter struggle. The human side, knowing all too well what agony lay ahead, naturally shrank back in horror. Was there no other way to carry out the plan of salvation than to drink the cup of suffering? Physically, must He really endure rejection, abuse, then death on a cross? Spiritually, must He really endure the torments of hell, the torture of God-forsakenness, to atone for the sins of the world? Even in our comfortable pews, we can sympathize with this very human prayer: **“My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.”**

But the divine side of Jesus knew all too well what our salvation required and why. The divine side knew that sin could not just be fluffed away. Someone had to take the consequences. Someone. And God did not want us to take the consequences. His love, His mercy, His faithfulness did not want us to suffer that punishment, however much we deserved it. Yet what was the alternative? Didn’t justice require that a human being take the punishment for human sins? Really, there was only one alternative. Incarnation. If God would take on our human nature and, as a human being, atone for sins in our place, then justice would be satisfied and the price of our salvation would be paid.

So that was the plan. That was why Jesus came into the world as a human being: to carry out the plan; to pay the price in full. And Jesus' divine side knew this. He had to take the punishment for every sin that ever was or would be. He had to make atonement on the hard wood of the cross. He had to drink the cup of suffering and drink it to the dregs. He had to! Only then could we be redeemed from sin. Only then could we be forgiven. Only then could we receive the gift of eternal life. Only then.

So yes, Jesus sweat blood as He prayed in the garden! But ever-obedient to His Father, Jesus' human side came to terms with what must be. Fully committed to us and our salvation, He said, "**Not My will but Your will be done.**" Then He did what He had come to do. He drank the cup of suffering to the dregs.

And my friends, think what was in that cup! Think what you and I put in that cup! All of our failures and faults. All of our grudges and greed. All of our big sins and little ones, all the wrongs we've done and the good we've left undone – all of that and more filled the cup of suffering, and Jesus drank it to the dregs. Though it meant tasting the kiss of betrayal from Judas and the slanders of Caiaphas and his crowd, still Jesus drank it. Though it meant tasting rejection by a hate-filled mob followed by mockery and whipping by the Romans, still Jesus drank it. Though it meant tasting the agony of crucifixion, the pounding of nails through hands and feet; though it meant tasting the ridicule of bystanders, abandonment by His friends; though it meant tasting the torment of feeling "**My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?**" – still Jesus drank the cup of suffering, still Jesus drank it to the dregs, still Jesus drank it to the dregs there on the cross! And why? To redeem us from the power of sin. To release us from the power of death. To reconcile us to the Father and ratify a new covenant that would offer us what we could never deserve: the forgiveness of our sins, and with it, the assurance of everlasting life. Yes, that's why Jesus drank the cup of suffering!

And how grateful we are that He did! But as we worship here this Maundy Thursday, do we see the connection between that cup and the Communion cup Jesus consecrated at the Last Supper? Actually, there is a very close connection, for Jesus' drinking the cup of suffering is what fills our Communion cup with blessing! Think what Jesus puts into our Communion cup. It's not just wine; rather, in, under, and with the wine, Jesus gives us the assurance of forgiveness. His Word declares, "**This is my blood of the new covenant, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.**" It's not just wine; rather in, under, and with the wine, Jesus gives the assurance of salvation. His Word declares, "**Those who eat My flesh and drink My blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day.**" No, what Jesus puts in the Communion cup is definitely not just wine; in, under, and with the wine, Jesus gives us His very Self. His Word declares, "**Those who eat My flesh and drink My blood abide in Me, and I in them.**" Can you imagine a better trade? Jesus drains the cup full of failures and faults, then fills our cup with forgiveness. Jesus drains the cup full of grudges and greed, then fills our cup with grace. Jesus drains the cup full of

bitter thoughts, words, and deeds, then fills our cup with salvation! That's the best trade there could be! And just think! Scripture says He does this **"as often as you drink it."** Not just once or once-in-a-while but as often as we take Communion, Jesus offers these blessing afresh! Not just once or once-in-a-while but as often as we take Communion, Jesus comes to cleanse and strengthen us. **"As often as you drink it,"** Scripture says! **"As often as you drink it."** Small wonder Paul calls it the Cup of Blessing!

And when we receive it as such, what a difference the sacrament can make! You know, in the church where I grew up, we didn't celebrate Communion very often, so for many years I saw it as something exotic, almost divorced from everyday life. Only as I got older and could receive Communion more often did I discover how helpful Communion is for finding strength, for refreshing faith, for growing closer to the Lord. And surely, that is what Jesus meant Communion to be! A means of pouring all the blessings He won on the cross into our everyday lives. A means of pouring His presence and power into the everyday struggles we face. Yes, surely that is what Jesus meant Communion to be: a means of grace; a cup of blessing! In my own life, there are times when the assurance of forgiveness is most meaningful to me. At other times, the Lord's real presence deeply touches my heart. And at other times – well, there are many different facets to Communion, aren't there? And every one of them is so precious, so needed! What gifts Jesus gives in this Cup of Blessing **"as often as" we "drink it!"** What an incentive to receive it often!

Speaking of which... March two years ago, I went to Communion with my cousin in Germany; it was shortly after his wife died. He, too, had been raised with the idea that Communion was something exotic, not for everyday, and it had been quite a while since he had received the sacrament. So beforehand, we talked a bit about its meaning. He wanted to be sure he properly understood it. And then at the service, we waited to until the very last to go up to the altar. But as he and his daughters and I communed together, and especially as the Pastor blessed us with the verse **"I am the resurrection and the life,"** what comfort, what encouragement, Communion gave us! And sure, I suppose God could have given us the same comfort through the Word alone. I suppose God could have given the same encouragement through prayer. But there was just something about having Jesus bring it to us personally, tangibly, sacramentally that made such a wonderful difference. It did for me, and I know it did for my cousin, for not only did he say so afterward, ever since then he's been communing more often – and finding out just how helpful Communion is in everyday life!

I'm sure the Lord would like all of us to find out how helpful Communion is – whatever our particular need may be. And that is His invitation: **"Taste and see!"** If we find ourselves struggling with guilt, Communion brings us His assurance of forgiveness. If we're feeling weak or overwhelmed, Communion offers His divine strength. If we're feeling alone or distant from the Lord, He comes to us personally in Communion. And even when all is going well, He

comes to aid us in our growth. There are so many ways Communion can be helpful! And really, when you think about it, would Jesus have even instituted Communion, would He have made such promises for “**as often as**” we receive it, if He did not mean Communion to be helpful in our everyday lives? Hard to imagine! Just as hard as to imagine Him dying for us on the cross if He did not mean us to make full use of His grace in our everyday lives! Jesus drained the cup of suffering that we might drink deeply of His grace. He wants to fill us with His grace any way He can. One way is through Communion. So let’s make the most of it. Let’s receive it often. Let’s open our hearts and minds and souls to all the benefits Jesus offers in this Cup of Blessing. Amen.