

So are we or aren't we celebrating Holy Communion every Sunday?

Though we may not want to admit it, the Lutheran Church must own its roots, at least according to practice and liturgy, by being birthed out of the Roman Catholic Church. Martin Luther was a monk and priest before he led the movement to reform the Catholic Church. In fact, Dr. Luther did not want to establish a “new” religious movement, he just wanted to reform the one he loved, which worshipped the God he loved. And concerning worship practice, this church celebrated communion every Sunday. This practice continued from the time the “Protestants” were finally recognized by the Catholic Church in 1555 with the Peace of Augsburg, which officially ended the struggle between Charles V and Lutheran Princes in the Holy Roman Empire allowing them to decide if their region would be either Lutheran or Catholic, until the Thirty Years War.

The Thirty Years War (1618 – 1648) was one of the most destructive conflicts in European history, fought mainly in the territory we now know as Germany. The destruction was so immense that it sparked the migration of people to the “New World” to escape the devastation. In the process, not only were the people losing their homeland and cultural identity by coming to America, but many of their religious practices were also temporarily augmented because of circumstances. One of the first structures that settlers would build would be a church – usually at the center of the community. However, while many of the congregations were founded by lay ministers, there was a severe shortage of ordained Lutheran pastors to fill the pulpits every Sunday. While the lay ministers often read “tracts” or sermons sent over from Germany in the absence of a regularly called pastor, the churches would rely on circuit preachers like Henry Melchior Muhlenberg to preach and provide the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion whenever they could attend. Therefore, over time, the practice of every Sunday communion was relegated to four times a year, first beginning out of necessity, and continuing on after so many generations as regular practice.

Sometime late in the 20th century, the synods of the Lutheran Church attempted to recapture the practice of every Sunday communion. Understanding that change happens slowly, over the last 30 years the

frequency of Holy Communion has increased in small increments. First, Holy Communion was celebrated once a month. Then communion was celebrated once a month plus on major festivals, and then minor festivals as well. Next a congregation would increase to two Sundays a month and soon whole seasons were added, especially the seasons of Advent and Lent. This has been the practice of Trinity Lutheran Church, as least as far as I have been able to discern from listening to the leadership of the congregation. Still, the question remains, are we or aren't we now celebrating Holy Communion every Sunday at Trinity?

The first answer to that question comes to us from the website of the ELCA:

A congregation with an ordained pastor should celebrate Holy Communion every Sunday. Celebrations are also appropriate on other occasions: Saturday evening preparation for Sunday, festivals and lesser festivals, midweek services, the Christian marriage and the burial of the dead, and other occasions on which the congregation assembles.

The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament states the principle this way:

According to the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Lutheran congregations celebrate the Holy Communion every Sunday and festival. This confession remains the norm for our practice.

The website of the ELCA continues:

The basic pattern of Christian worship is a weekly pattern: from Sunday to Sunday. Even before all Christians could agree on when to celebrate Easter, this weekly pattern was in place. From its earliest days, the community of Christians was described as people who gathered "on the first day of the week." This gathering on the first day of the week was not a matter of convenience; this was a workday in the ancient world. Rather, it was a witness to the community itself and its surrounding culture to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead on the first day of the week. This celebration involved doing what Christ had asked of his disciples at the Last supper: "do this in memory of me." In the second century Justin Martyr described the weekly liturgy of Christians:

On the day named after the sun, all who live in the city or countryside assemble in the same place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read for as long as time allows. When the lector has finished, the president addresses us, admonishing us and exhorting us to imitate the splendid things we have heard. Then we all stand and pray and, as we said earlier, when we have finished praying, bread, wine and water are brought up. The president offers prayers of thanksgiving, according to his ability, and the people give their assent with an "Amen."

Next, the gifts over which the thanksgiving has been spoken are distributed, and each one shares in them, while they are also sent via the deacons to the absent brethren. —Apology of Justin Martyr (ca. 150)

In the month of October, I spent time preaching on the reasons that weekly Holy Communion should be our norm of liturgical practice here at Trinity Lutheran Church. The pastors who preceded me had spent time slowly increasing the frequency of communion to the point where the final step to be taken was moving to celebrating Holy Communion every Sunday and every Festival. In my sermon from the 16th Sunday after Pentecost, October 2, 2011, I wrote these words:

Martin Luther wrote in "The Small Catechism" that the blessing we receive from eating and drinking Holy Communion is nothing less than "the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation". It is forgiveness that we not only hear, it is forgiveness that we can hold, touch, and take into our bodies. Think of how many people today would eagerly line up to touch the actual cross on which Jesus died. As incredible as that sounds, we have something even better in Holy Communion. In Holy Communion God touches our lips with forgiveness. He does this, not with a section of the cross, but with the sacrifice from the cross: Jesus Christ. In Holy Communion, we aren't "more forgiven" but it should make you "more certain" of forgiveness, for Jesus comes to you personally and touches you in bread and wine.

You and I have been given a special promise of Christ's presence in Word and Sacrament. The times in which you and I live pose a pastor with certain questions, questions like "What else will come along to take Christ out of the center of our communities and our existence?" As your pastor, I am building on a foundation that has been laid by those who came before me, and seeking to secure that foundation for those that will follow me. The societal supports we could once take

for granted are rapidly passing away in favor of a non-Christian or post-Christian context for daily life and work. What better foundation can we build upon each week, to reorganize our personal lives of faith and our assemblies together for worship, than upon the foundation of Christ – truly present with us – in Word AND Sacrament!

Scripture does not dictate that a church must observe communion at any frequency, every week, or once a month, or four times a year. It is a matter left to the prayerful discretion of each local church. However, since participation to receive Holy Communion is by invitation (and not demand) ... and since participation in worship services is by the call of the Holy Spirit (and not done so by fulfilling a requirement) ... then how can we not offer Holy Communion every Sunday? How does this reflect on our call to hospitality and welcoming new members? Are we putting up a barrier by not offering Holy Communion every Sunday? That is, when we don't offer weekly Holy Communion, will visitors (who are used to receiving weekly Holy Communion) attend elsewhere? Are we to dictate when visitors are to come and celebrate at the table with us? With these questions in mind, and with the consultation of the church council and the Worship and Music Committee, we will be celebrating Holy Communion weekly.

I want you to know that I am always aware of the length of our service and I am doing all that I can to assure that our service is not significantly longer because of celebrating Holy Communion every Sunday. Also, moving to every Sunday Communion does not mean that you have been doing it wrong for all these years. It is, as I said, a practice that was lost over time for a variety of reasons. If you have any questions, please, please, please call me or send me a note online. I am always available for discussion, prayer, and fellowship.

Pastor Dave