

In the name of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, dear friends,

When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God." After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.

"Father, forgive them" (Lk 23:34). Throughout this season of Lent, we have heard the prayer of Jesus again and again as it has echoed down through the centuries. As he prayed for those who were responsible for his torments and sorrows on the day of his death, so we pray for our forgiveness on those many occasions when we begin to sin as they did.

This evening we have before us an answer to that prayer. It is called the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It is, as Martin Luther wrote, *"the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ for us Christians to eat and to drink."*

Forgiveness has two parts to it. The first is that the offended party forgives his offender in his heart. The second is that he lets the offender know that he is forgiven. And it stands to reason that if the offender is guilty of some really great offense, or of a great number of offenses, the forgiver will really have his work cut out for him in convincing such a sinner that his sins really are forgiven.

We know that the number of our sins against God is impossible to count. And we know how grave a matter each one is in the sight of the Almighty. That is why, in his mercy, when he had forgiven us in his heart because of Jesus, he brought about such an extraordinary way to assure us that all our sins are indeed pardoned.

This is the matter we will discuss today/tonight so that, when we approach the Lord's altar, this prayer may be in our hearts:

Father, Forgive Us Through This Holy Supper!

“When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, ‘I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you.’” The apostles probably felt eager to eat the Passover meal with Christ as well, but not for the same reason. Passover, after all, was the high point of the year for them. It was Christmas and New Year’s and the Fourth of July all rolled into one festival. And the high point of the festival was the Passover dinner.

But Jesus’ zealous desire to share this meal with his chosen Twelve was based on so much more than just holiday spirit or religious fervor. It wasn’t just the highlight of the ceremonial calendar any longer. It was the very peak and summit of the entire history of Israel. Every celebration, every ritual observance, every ceremony and sacrifice, every Passover had led up to this very day and this very hour. No wonder Jesus was so eager to eat this particular Passover with his closest followers.

To understand why this was, we must once again recall what the Passover dinner was all about. It was a meal to remember the days of Moses when the Lord God, with an outstretched and mighty arm, had saved the Israelites from slavery and death in Egypt. For four centuries the people of Abraham had lived as slaves in the land of the pharaohs. But finally the day of their deliverance had come. The Lord their God had sent his messenger to the palace of the ruler of Egypt and had demanded, **“Let my people go!”** Pharaoh refused, and to punish his arrogance, the Lord let loose nine devastating plagues upon the land of the Nile. A strong and prosperous empire was brought to the very brink of utter destruction while its king hardened his heart against God’s demands.

And then the final plague was to come upon Egypt, the one that would finally force Pharaoh to let the people go: the slaughter of the firstborn in every house in Egypt. **About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the slave girl, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well. There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt—worse than there has ever been or ever will be again. But among the Israelites not a dog will bark at any man or animal. (Ex 11:4-7)**

Not a dog would bark, but there would be a price. The Israelites were to slaughter a perfect yearling lamb and paint its blood above their doors and on the doorposts. This would save them. This would be the sign that a death had already occurred in the house and that the angel of death was not to come there to take yet another victim. And what was to be done with the lamb once its blood was drained? It was to be roasted and eaten as part of a meal that would include bitter herbs and unleavened bread. And for every anniversary of that day to come, the Israelites ate the flesh of a lamb, recalling the death of that first lamb that had bought them freedom and life through its bleeding and dying.

Now can you see why Jesus was so eager to have this ritual meal with his disciples on this particular night? For his beloved people, the race not only of Abraham but of Adam, were caught in the slavery of sin and were condemned to the eternal death of hell for their sins. And on this night he would take the place of the lamb of the Passover. He would put himself between us and our doom. As the body and the life of the spotless lamb was slain in Egypt, so Jesus would offer up his body and his life for the sins of the world. As with the blood of the lamb in Egypt, Jesus' blood is now the sign that a death has already taken place for sin. No other victim is to be gathered by the avenging angel.

Some of his disciples should have been very aware of this. It was Andrew and John, after all, who had stood on the banks of the Jordan River with the Baptist years earlier and had heard that prophet tell them, "**Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!**" (Jn 1:29). Every good Jew among the apostles had been trained in the particulars of this supper all their lives, from their first Passover until this. On this night they would see its fulfillment.

That was why the Lord God had commanded that this Passover meal be a yearly celebration. Never were the Israelites to forget the price of their rescue from slavery and death. That roasted lamb, the savory smell of it wafting through the air of every Jewish home on all those Passovers throughout the century and the succulent taste as they ate it; the sparkle and the bouquet and the ruby darkness and the flavor of the wine they drank with the meal—these would call to remembrance the great salvation that God had brought to the forefathers of Israel.

And that is why Jesus told his apostles, "**Do this in remembrance of me.**" Until the end of history itself, Christ's people will also meet and share in this meal to recall and to impress upon their minds the great salvation that their Lord won for them upon the cross. We will eat and drink the salvation that Christ Jesus has won for us.

Such ceremonies as the Passover dinner may seem foreign and ancient to us. Yet the idea of a ritual meal is not completely lost on us. We have our rites of eating for birthday cakes, wedding cakes, Thanksgiving meals, and the like. The very food, the way it is cooked and served, conveys to us a message louder than words.

Take the wedding cake rite, for example. Bride and groom wield the knife together for the first cut of the cake—that is significant. They feed each other the first pieces—that is significant (and sometimes messy!). And then one piece is to be saved in the freezer and taken out for them to eat together on their first anniversary, to remember the day they became one.

Communion does a similar thing for us. It is a ritual meal for us. But unlike what we might expect, in this ritual it is really God who performs, not us. We are just there to eat and drink and be convinced of what it means. We do nothing to gain God's favor by undergoing this rite of eating and drinking. We are here to eat and drink what he serves to us. We are the mere receivers of his gift, which makes the forgiveness of our sins all the more real to us.

The bread is consecrated as the pastor speaks the words that Christ himself spoke over the bread of the Passover. With his words, Christ promised that his Supper is more than mere bread but also his very body, which, like the flesh of the Passover lamb, was given for us. And the wine is likewise consecrated with Christ's words by which it becomes more than mere fruit of the vine but also Jesus' very blood, which, like the lamb's blood on the doorposts and lintels, saves us from eternal death. Do you recall what we discussed several minutes ago, how when a person's offenses are many and grave, it will take an awful lot to convince the sinner that his sin is actually forgiven? Look at how much God has put forth to give this forgiveness to us and to make us believe in it and to cement that faith in our hearts. Not only is it written in the Bible for our eyes to see. Not only is it spoken from the pulpit for our ears to hear. Our forgiveness is held under our noses for us to smell and put on our tongues for us to taste!

If we have learned one thing from our meditations during these 40 days of Lent, it is that our sins truly are a grave affair. How often have we strayed into trespasses similar in nature to the deeds of the disciples who fled in fear, of the judges who condemned in hatred and in weakness, of the mob that rejected, of the soldiers that mocked, of the women who did not weep for their sins! How welcome to our ears, therefore, is the prayer of our Savior: "**Father, forgive them!**"

And now, here before us, is the answer to that prayer: *Your sins are forgiven, because my Son is the Lamb whose blood has washed them away, whose body was sacrificed upon the cross so that you might have freedom from sin and life everlasting. Take and eat that body. Take and drink that blood. Taste and smell his dying love. Eat and drink the forgiveness he has won for you. Amen.*