

Holy Supper and Heaven

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

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Readings

Isaiah 55:1, 2, 10, 11 (Kempton Translation, modified)

- 1 Ho! All who thirst,
Go to the waters!
And he who has no money;
Go, buy, and eat!
And go, buy without money,
And without price, wine and milk.
- 2 Why do you spend money for what is not bread,
And your toil for that which will not satisfy?
Listening listen to Me, and eat what is good;
And your soul shall delight itself in abundance.
- 10 For as the shower [of rain] comes down, and the snow, from the heavens,
And does not return there,
But soaks the earth,
And makes her give birth and grow,
That she may give seed to the sower,
And bread to the eater;
- 11 So shall My Word be which goes out from My mouth;
It shall not return to Me empty;
But it shall do that in which I delight,
And it shall prosper where I have sent it.

John 6:26, 27, 32-35 (Kempton Translation, modified)

²⁶ Jesus answered them, and said, "Amen, Amen, I say to you, You seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the bread, and were satisfied. ²⁷ Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which remains to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give to you.... ³² Amen, Amen, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread out of heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread out of heaven. ³³ For the Bread of God is He who comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world."

³⁴ Then they said to Him, "Lord, always give us this bread."

³⁵ And Jesus said to them, "I am the Bread of Life; he who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst."

True Christian Religion 669

The purposes of baptism and holy supper can be compared to a church, which is so old it has sunk into the ground, and now lies surrounded by ruins reaching to its roof, so that young men and old walk upon it, ride in carriages or on horseback across it, with no idea that such a church lies hidden beneath their feet, containing altars of gold, walls covered inside in silver and ornaments made of precious stones; and these cannot be dug up and brought to light, except by means of the spiritual sense, which has at the present time been revealed for the new church, so that it can be used in the worship of the Lord.

Baptism and holy supper can also be compared to a double church, in which there is one below and another above. In the lower one the good news is preached about the Lord's new coming, and also about regeneration and so salvation under His guidance. From this church a path around the altar leads up to the upper church, where the Holy Supper is celebrated; and from there a passage exists to heaven, where the Lord receives those who come.

Introduction

- You may have spent the last week getting back into the routine of normal life.
 - Christmas is done.
 - Christmas break is done.
 - Back to school; back to work.
- There is something that can feel good about getting back to normal life.
 - But it can also be a letdown after the excitement and busyness of the Christmas season.
 - And it can also be a time when some of the hard things of our lives (that maybe we were able to somewhat ignore during the hubbub of the Christmas season), return and almost feel more heavy than they did before.
- Normal life can sometimes feel like an endless slog of things we have to get done.
 - Psalm 127 talks about this:
 - 1 Unless the LORD builds the house,
They labor in vain who build it;
Unless the LORD guards the city,
The watchman stays awake in vain.
 - 2 It is vain for you to rise up early,
To sit up late,
To eat the bread of sorrows;
For so He gives His beloved sleep.
- Getting up early, staying up late, working hard but feeling like we're eating the bread of sorrows.
 - Have you had times when life feels like that?
 - It's important to know that the Lord doesn't want that for you.
 - He loves you and wants you to have joy in working on things with Him.
 - He wants to give you a different kind of bread to eat.

Work for the Food which Remains to Everlasting Life

- There was a time when the Lord miraculously fed five thousand people.
- He left that area, but people followed Him and came to find Him and He knew that they had come because they wanted more natural food.
 - He understood what they wanted, but He called them to work for something better.
 - He said to them, "Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which remains to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give to you...." (John 6:27).
- He says the same thing to us: "Work for eternal food."
 - The Lord knows that we will sometimes put a lot of energy into things that will not ultimately feed us.
 - Like the prophet Isaiah said, "Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your toil for that which will not satisfy?" (Isaiah 55:2).

Why We Come to Church

- This is part of why we come to church: to learn about eternal things.
 - The passage from our lessons from *True Christian Religion* talked about being in a church and learning about important things.
 - A church in which "the good news is preached about the Lord's new coming, and also about regeneration and so salvation under His guidance" (*True Christian Religion* 669).
 - It's important to remember that what we hear in church is ultimately good news.
 - The Lord has come.
 - We can be saved from hell.
 - We can have our hearts gradually changed by the Lord to become less selfish and more loving.
 - This involves a lot of work but it is ultimately good, hopeful news.
- Here's the intriguing thing: just learning about these things is not really the goal.
 - It's important, but the Lord wants more for us.
 - The passage from *True Christian Religion* that we read was making a comparison.
 - It was saying that baptism and holy supper are like two churches, one above the other.

- The lower one is like baptism and that is where the good news is preached.
- But then the passage says this: "From this [lower] church a path around the altar leads up to the upper church, where the Holy Supper is celebrated; and from there a passage exists to heaven, where the Lord receives those who come."
- Picture that in this space.
 - We're in the lower church.
 - We can go up to an upper church.
 - And from the upper church we can go to heaven.

The Lord Wants Us to Be Really Present With Him

- The Lord doesn't want us to just *know about* regeneration, salvation, and heaven: He wants us to *experience* them.
 - He doesn't want us to know about heaven as some distant thing that we may one day experience: He wants us to make our way towards heaven each day and to experience tastes of heaven along the way.
- This is part of why He gave us the sacrament of holy supper.
 - The Lord wants us to receive His goodness and His truth, take them into ourselves, and have them become part of us.
 - The holy supper gives us something that we can physically do – eating bread and drinking wine – that exactly corresponds to the spiritual eating and drinking that the Lord wants us to be doing on the inside (*True Christian Religion* 728).
 - There is a power in having an external ritual that we do that represents the internal work that we're trying to do.
- Listen to this passage:
 - When a person is being regenerated, the Lord is certainly present, and by means of His Divine action prepares the person for heaven. But in order really to enter heaven, the person must really present themselves to the Lord; and because the Lord really presents Himself to the person, the person really receives Him, yet not as He was hanging on the cross, but as He is in His glorified Human, in which He is present. Divine good is His body, Divine truth His blood. These are given to the person and are the means of his regeneration, so that he is in the Lord and the Lord is in him. For the eating which occurs in the Holy Supper is a spiritual eating. (*True Christian Religion* 728)

- The spiritual work that we do can sometimes feel very ethereal and not grounded in reality.
 - Maybe we did some really difficult internal work on a particular day, to not go down a bad path that we have in the past.
 - Could anyone on the outside notice the difference?
 - Did anything actually change?
- Similarly our relationship with the Lord might feel ethereal and hard to pin down.
 - Holy Supper is a way to provide correspondential grounding to our spiritual work and to our relationship with the Lord.

Holy Supper is Like Signing a Contract

- The teachings for the New Church are clear that taking holy supper really does something, really makes a difference.
- Listen to this passage:
 - The case of the Holy Supper is similar to that of a treaty, which having been agreed and signed is finally sealed. The Lord Himself teaches us that His blood is a covenant, for He said when He took the cup and gave it:

"Drink of it, all of you. This is my blood, the blood of the new testament"
(Matthew 26:27-28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20).

It is in keeping with the way things are arranged in the world, that there should be a signing as a guarantee, and this follows discussion of the terms. How can anyone have a commission or a will without a signature? How can one have a judgment without a signed decision to make it effective? How can one own a house without a bill of sale or an agreement with the owner? These last examples are only added as an illustration to enable even a simpleminded person to grasp that the Holy Supper is a kind of guarantee, seal, token and evidence of commission, to show, even in the sight of angels, that they are sons of God. It is in addition like a key to a home in heaven, where they may reside for ever. (*True Christian Religion* 730)

- This passage is saying that taking holy supper is like signing on the dotted line in your contract or covenant with the Lord.
 - Are you willing to sign a contract with the Lord?
 - We can want to go to heaven someday in kind of a vague way.

- It's very different to imagine formally signing a contract to say that we want to go to heaven and that we're signing up to do the work that is necessary to get there.
- When we sign up for a new primary care doctor, there's going to be paperwork involved.
 - If you sign up to work with a therapist, or a lawyer, or a building contractor, there will be paperwork involved and you will be agreeing to uphold your part of the agreement.
 - Signing a contract with a builder is very different from vaguely wishing that you had a new house to live in.
- This passage sounds like holy supper is meant to feel more like signing a contract than just vaguely wishing something.
 - That's part of the value of it.
 - Things are different afterwards.
- It's a bit like getting married.
 - Yes, a lot of the work of marriage, before you get married and after you get married is about somewhat intangible things in your relationship with your spouse.
 - But there still is a real significance to when you actually say your vows and are pronounced husband and wife.
 - The relationship is different from that point on.
 - There is a different level of commitment.
 - The same is meant to be true in a person's relationship with the Lord and holy supper.
 - There is a real power and importance to that person taking holy supper, as a way of marking a change in that relationship.
 - You could think of every time you take holy supper after that as being like a renewal of vows – a time when you are recommitting to your relationship with the Lord.
 - Or renewing your subscription. If you're renewing your subscription, will you do the work?

Conclusion

- We start in that lower church.
 - There is lots for us to learn, especially when we're still growing up.
- It takes a while before we are ready to move to that upper church and take holy supper.
- Even once we are an adult and have started taking holy supper, there is still a lot of work to do to become the kind of person the Lord wants us to be and to be ready to experience heaven.
- But the truths that we learn in that lower church are designed to help us get where we need to go.
 - The Lord's Word which goes out from His mouth is like the showers of rain that come down from the heavens and soaks the earth and makes it possible for things to grow that may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater.
 - The Lord's Word, if we let it, will do the good work that is meant to do in our lives too – it will not return to the Lord empty.
 - Especially if we are willing to commit to doing our part of the covenant by having supper with our God.
- Making any commitment is daunting and we're always going to feel some resistance to "signing our lives away."
 - But holy supper and a close working relationship with the Lord is a good deal for us.
 - If we do our part, He will always do His.
 - We work our way upwards to the Lord and He comes down to meet us where we are – He is the bread of God who came down out of heaven and gives life to the world."
 - He will give life and heaven to us.
- Amen.

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.