

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT | MARCH 14, 2021

NUMBERS 21:4-9 | PSALM 107:1-3, 17-22 | EPHESIANS 2:1-10 | JOHN 3:14-21

This is the fifth (!) in a series of reflections on the meaning of the Eucharist.

Last week, we talked about celebrations of the Eucharist during the twelfth century. And I know twelfth century church history isn't everyone's thing, so this week I want to get back into a more modern context by going to the 1520s. If you want to understand Lutheran Eucharistic theology, this is an interesting place to start. Because it's during the 1520s when the Lutheran movement shifts from just lobbing criticisms at abuses in the Catholic Church to actually creating its own practices.¹ Not just *Don't do that*, but *Let's do it like this*. And it's during that time that Luther writes two Mass settings, one in Latin and one in German.

Luther's biggest criticism of the medieval Catholic Mass was that it had become a kind of good work that was done to please God. If you go back and read the liturgy that was used around that time, you'd see that the Eucharist was framed as a sacrifice offered to God. The assembly, in this case that's you, would watch as your priest, a person of superior moral standing, in this case that's me, made an offering to God on your behalf. You could be in the room, but you were here mostly as a spectator, eavesdropping on a conversation your priest was having with God.²

And so if you read the early Lutheran Mass settings, you see that Luther is playing with the directions of our speech and action. The Eucharist isn't a sacrifice offered from people through the priest to God. It's a gift offered from God to people.³ And there's a priest there for the sake of maintaining order in the service.⁴

So a lot of Luther's reforms are just deleting anything that would suggest that we're offering something to God. Offertory prayers talking about sacrifice? Gone. The Canon, what we would call a Eucharistic Prayer, that talks about our offering to God? Gone.⁵ The most blatant offender here would be the lifting up of the bread and cup toward the heavens. If we're getting rid of the Eucharist as offering something to God, then obviously that's not going to stay in.

Except it does. Luther says that we're going to keep that, but it's going to mean something else. It looks the same, but the meaning changes. We're not lifting it up to God. We're lifting it up so that everyone here can clearly see that it's meant for them. After all, Luther tells us, lifting up doesn't always mean what you think it does.

We saw another example of that in St. John's gospel today. When speaking with Nicodemus, an insightful religious teacher, Jesus says that the Son of Man must be "lifted up." For any religious teacher or spiritual student, being "lifted up" means attaining some kind of enlightenment, glory, and transcendence. When Jesus says that he must be "lifted up," that's probably what Nicodemus is thinking. If you don't quite understand who Jesus is now, just wait until the most impressive stuff starts happening. Deeper teachings. Better miracles. Better signs. Then you'll really see God's glory. As Jesus puts it later in this gospel, "When I am lifted up... I will draw all people to myself."

¹ I realize this is comically oversimplified.

² A useful summary is at "An Appreciation of Luther's Critique of the Eucharistic Sacrifice," *Let's Talk* (blog), December 18, 2017, <http://mcsletstalk.org/reformation-jubilee-500/appreciating-luther/appreciation-luthers-critique-eucharistic-sacrifice/>.

³ In the German Mass, Luther suggests that the words of institution should be chanted with the same tone as the gospel to make it clear that it's being addressed to you.

⁴ The important point here is that in the Lutheran expression, clergy are designated to maintain order in the church and not because they have superior moral standing over others.

⁵ This is why the *ELW* says you can omit the Eucharistic Prayer entirely and just use the Words of Institution.

ADVENT LUTHERAN CHURCH

777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481
(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG

Except that's not the lifting up that Jesus is talking about at all. The moment of God's glory won't shine through in some moment of grandeur. No climb to the heavens. No ascent to the skies. No, when Jesus talks about his being "lifted up," he's talking about his crucifixion. In St. John's telling, we see the power that Jesus has when he refuses to use it. We see the divine life in him when he lays it down. And we see God's glory when Christ is lifted up on the cross. It looks the same, but the meaning changes. It's not what Nicodemus expects. But, John tells us, lifting up doesn't always mean what you think it does.

Those early Lutheran Mass settings get that. That because Christ has offered his life once for all, because he has been "lifted up," we don't need to offer anything to get access to God or to get God's attention. The Eucharist isn't about us offering something or lifting something up to God. It's about God offering the divine life to us.⁶

But there's a big problem here. If the Eucharist isn't about us offering something to God, why do we have an offering as part of our service? Why do we have an offering as part of the Meal in particular? If you showed up at church and didn't know what was happening, it would probably look like we're paying admission to get to the table. You put your envelope in the basket, you hand your ticket to the usher, and you get to come up front. But that's very much not what's happening.

In the early church, it was common for the offering to include food gathered from the marketplaces that morning. In addition to whatever financial offerings people had to support people in need, there would be bread and wine and other food brought to the table for the meal.⁷ And watch the directions here. When the meal was over, the extra food would be sent back out along with the financial offering. So when you made an offering, the offering really wasn't to God. It was to God's people. It was to continuing God's mission in the world.

And that's really the key. It's not offered to God. It's offered to God's creation. Which means that what we offer in the Eucharist is not just money or time or talents or treasure. But the entirety of our lives. Every relationship. Every desire. Every hope. Every regret. Every success. Every shortcoming. We bring it here to the table and lift it up to God. Not because God needs it, but because we know the world does. When we "lift up our hearts," we are saying that we are offering our entire selves in service of God's mission and trusting that God can use us to serve a world in need. That, as one of our post-communion prayers puts it, we can "give ourselves away as bread for the hungry."

That's not quite what we expect. It's probably not what Nicodemus expected, either. It's fun to lift up our best ideas. It's fun to lift up our skills and our talents and time and treasures and strengths and assets and inventories and interests. It's easy to think that God can use those in service of the kingdom of God. It's harder to believe that God can use all of us. That the glory of God can shine through even in our weaknesses. That our cracks of our lives we try to patch up and hide from others are actually the places where the light gets in. But that's what Jesus tells us. Our lives look the same, but the meaning changes.

It's not what we expect. But lifting up doesn't always mean what you think it does.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

⁶ This is sort of what the author of Hebrews does when they talk about the priesthood of Christ being once for all. I think there's a discussion of this in Gerald O'Collins and Michael Keenan Jones, *Jesus Our Priest: A Christian Approach to the Priesthood of Christ* (OUP Oxford, 2010).

⁷ Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Fortress Press, n.d.), 45.

ADVENT LUTHERAN CHURCH

777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481
(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG