

*“I am the living bread  
that came down from heaven.  
Whoever eats of this bread  
will live forever;  
and the bread that I will give  
for the life of the world  
is my flesh.”*

~John 6:51

Dear Northern Great Lakes Synod,



I remember my First Communion on Easter Sunday of my 5<sup>th</sup> grade year of school. On the Maundy Thursday previous, our community of faith gathered for a Seder Meal and even though it was Lent, I had an Epiphany. That meal,

coupled with the worship experiences of The Three Days (also called The Triduum: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday with Easter Vigil), connected the dots in my 11-year-old mind to the chronology of the passion story. Calling Holy Communion the “last supper” actually made sense for the first time. One would think that this would have been obvious, but I confess it was not. Until that Maundy Thursday Seder, I didn’t quite understand the flow and connectedness of Jesus’ last hours. When Easter Sunday came, there were two worship services with a brunch in between. I had to stay for both services, so I went to communion twice that morning. My parents thought that was funny and I remember not really understanding why.

I would guess most of us have a First Communion story. And those who are older will remember when Holy Communion was celebrated far less frequently – annually even, then maybe monthly, then every other week, and for many of our congregations, our pre-pandemic rhythm was weekly.

For the last thirty years or so, our church body has encouraged weekly communion so that people will be reminded with a clear and tangible sign, a sign they can taste and touch, that Christ is with them, and they are forgiven and loved. After all, this news is so good it is just that difficult to believe. We need to be reminded regularly. In the words of Luther, “This is most certainly true.”

But then the pandemic made worshipping together in person unwise. And what is Holy Communion without the gathered assembly?

Faithful people tried to answer this question in consideration of our theological traditions and in new practices meant to meet the challenges.

- Some fasted until we could gather again, relying on the presence of Christ in the Word proclaimed, personal devotions, and Bible study through online or written communications.
- Some provided a combination of online worship followed by communion offered in the parking lot, referred to by some as “drive through communion.”
- Some encouraged online viewers to provide their own elements at home, bread and juice/wine, which was consumed during an online communion service where people were gathered virtually.
- Some encouraged bringing your own elements to parking lot worship, broadcasted through a short-range FM transmitter, so people were able to worship together, separately in their cars.
- Many gathered for worship outside and came up with creative ways to safely distribute the elements, including the newly invented “communion pods” with wafer and juice prepackaged.

How much of these new practices will continue post-pandemic remains to be seen. As we enter August, our gospel readings will highlight the words of Jesus regarding his identity as the Bread of Life and the importance of eating and

drinking in memory of him. Week after week we will hear about Jesus and bread and body and blood. I do believe it is not uncommon for weekly preachers to feel like they have nothing left to say about Jesus and bread by the third week.

With our gospel readings so focused on Jesus as the Bread of Life in the coming weeks, and as the Church emerges from pandemic challenges and begins to reestablish former practices, now is a good time to consider again what is Holy Communion and how do we best honor its practice so that what we do and think and is “good, right, and salutary.”

In October, as part of Lifelong Faith Formation, I invite you to join me in reflecting on how our sacramental theology has been challenged or affirmed by pandemic practices and wrestle together over questions that the pandemic has brought to the fore. For example:

- Can I record the service and press replay at the consecration part so I can have communion at home at a time when it’s more convenient?
- Do we still need a pastor if our dad has been blessing the elements at home?
- If a TV preacher had tried to offer communion during their program pre-pandemic, there would have been a holy uproar. Why has that changed?
- What have people found to be most meaningful? What has fallen short of that?
- If I don’t have communion every week, or if I missed it for many weeks, will God hold that against me?
- What are the pros and cons of having weekly Holy Communion?
- What effects has the pandemic had on people’s understanding of the presence of Christ in and out of the community of faith?
- What is non-negotiable for communion to be holy?

As a kid, I was glad when there wasn’t Holy Communion because then there would be a children’s sermon – a concession, I’m guessing, to those who were concerned with the length of the worship time. As a young adult, I found that I missed communion if it wasn’t offered, but also found the liturgy of the weekly communion service to not leave a whole lot of room for any other creative worship ideas. During the pandemic, I found that I preferred to wait until I could eat and drink with the Body of Christ, that is, my siblings in Christ as the gathered assembly. For me, anything less than that felt, well...less than. And I found it was important to me to give and receive the words “for you” on a one-to-one basis and not collectively.

During the pandemic, our congregations and pastors have done their best to navigate all the questions and decisions that the pandemic demanded. It has not been easy. I have taken comfort in remembering that this is Christ’s church and whatever mistakes we made in the last year, God will have another 100 years to correct before the next major pandemic strikes. However, I do believe there is room for us, as people of faith who love our church, to pause and reflect on what we believe are the essential components of our worshipping life. Whether this reflection happens in your own devotions, with a group in your congregations, or as part of our Synod wide conversation, I believe there will be blessing.

Jesus commands us to eat and drink. Add to that the promise of his presence, and we have more than enough reason to desire a spot at the Lord’s Table. In good Lutheran tradition, that invites the engagement of both head and heart, we are blessed to wrestle with the question...and ask it again...what does this mean?

Yours in Christ,  
Bishop Katherine Finegan