Hebrews 10:22-23
Maundy Thursday • April 5, 2007
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church • Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls

"…Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful" (Heb 10:22-23).

I. Feasts

"Let us draw near with a true heart." You hear this portion of our text often, at the start of most services here at Good Shepherd. As the Confession begins the progression toward the Lord's Supper, the pastor bids, "Beloved in the Lord, let us draw near with a true heart and confess our sins unto God our Father." Draw near to God and confess your sins to Him. Now, I ask you: does that really sound like such a good idea? The Lord is powerful, and the Lord hates sin: on the face of it, drawing near and telling Him you're guilty sounds even more foolish than applying for your dream job by submitting a resume of all your failures and lapses in judgment, or taking your dream girl out on a date after failing to shower for several days prior. We sinful beings impress people only when we do our best to cover up our weaknesses as best we can. So does it sound smart to draw near to God and confess our sins to Him? No—at least not if we're trying to get Him to forgive us because of our good works.

The Lord has not always called for His people to draw near to Him: it's a New Testament gift. Back in the Old Testament, the people of Israel kept their distance. God was nearby: He dwelt in the Most Holy Place first of the tabernacle, then of the temple, behind a thick curtain. No one was allowed behind the curtain: for a sinner to step behind that curtain and into the presence of the Holy God was to be struck down instantly. No one was allowed to draw near to God…except for one. The high priest could do it—but only one day a year.

We normally think of the Lord's Supper connected to the Passover, and it is right to do so. After all, Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper at the Passover, declaring that He was the Passover Lamb who was to be sacrificed to save His people. The ties between Passover and Communion are strong: the Passover Lamb was to be sacrificed, then eaten; when Jesus instituted Holy Communion, He declared the same about Himself on His cross and in His Supper.

But our text tonight connects the Lord's Supper to another Old Testament festival—the Day of Atonement, the one day a year when the high priest dared to draw near to God at God's bidding. This wasn't a casual event: the Lord had given specific instructions. Among them, the high priest would wash himself with water and then put on his priestly garments. He would make sacrifices. Then he would take some of the blood from the sacrifices, along with fire and incense, and step behind the curtain into the Most Holy Place. There, he would sprinkle some of the blood on the Ark of the Covenant before

God. By God's command, the blood made atonement for the sins of the people—the blood covered up their sins.

Therefore, God forgave the people of Israel: not because of their works, and not because they drew near to Him. They waited outside while the high priest drew near on their behalf, anxiously waiting outside to hear that their sins were forgiven.

All of this, of course, was commanded by God in order to point to the Savior. Jesus would come and make the Sacrifice for the sins of the world. Jesus would come and *be* the Sacrifice for the sins of the world. He is your High Priest. He has taken His sacrificial blood into the Most Holy Place—heaven itself, and presented it to His Father. The blood of Jesus Christ covers up and cleanses you from all your sins. That is all His work, His doing; and that is why you are forgiven.

That is also why, when Jesus died, the temple curtain tore in two, top to bottom. There is no more need for sacrifices, because the Sacrifice for sin has now been made, once for all. There is no more need for a high priest who draws near and stands as go-between between man and God: Jesus, both man and God, is your high priest. For His sake, you can draw near to God…because God draws near to you.

II. The Supper

Here and now, you do what only the high priest dared to do—and then only once a year. Here you come into the presence of God. In the words of our text, you draw near to God with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having your hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and your bodies washed with pure water.

You draw near to God: that is what the Lord's Supper is all about. The Lord Jesus is certainly present there, just as He promises: "Take and eat, this is My body…take and drink, this is My blood…for the forgiveness of sins." The Lord is present—just as present as He was behind the curtain in the Most Holy Place of the temple. There is no curtain anymore, though: there's a veil over the elements to remind you of it. But before the Supper, the veil is lifted: because the Lord is there, with forgiveness, for you.

So you draw near with a true heart. A false heart says, "I can draw near to God because I am good enough on my own. My good works cancel out my sins, and so God loves me." A false heart says, "I can draw near to God, whatever my unrepented sins or beliefs, because what matters is that I've made the effort to come." A true heart says, "I am a sinner who cannot please God. I can only draw near to Him because the Sacrifice has been made for me. I can only draw near because Christ has died for me." Like the high priest of old, then, you come forward with the assurance that the Sacrifice has been made.

And you come for the forgiveness of sins. The high priest of old didn't say, "I will not go into the Holy of Holies because the people are sinful." Rather, he entered because they were sinful, because they needed the forgiveness God promised. Likewise, this meal

is not for the sinless, but for those who know their sinfulness and need for forgiveness. It is for sinners that Jesus comes.

Remembering how the high priest washed with water before he entered, you rejoice that you come as one whose heart has been sprinkled from an evil conscience and your body washed with pure water, for your Lord has added His holy Word to water in Baptism, and so He has purified you of all sin. He has joined you to His work of dying and rising in that Sacrament, so that He might join you to His person in this one: for here He gives you His very body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins.

That is what Jesus says this Sacrament is about: as His people, washed clean in Baptism, you come into His presence for the forgiveness of sins. As you come forward, in effect you make the same journey as the high priest on the Day of Atonement, past the baptismal sea to the Holy of Holies, into the presence of God for forgiveness: not once a year, but as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup.

As Luther says in the Small Catechism, this is no child's play. This Supper is about the presence of God with His people. First and foremost, the Communion is the Communion between you and your Savior—for your forgiveness, life and salvation. It is not merely a symbolic drama to think about a Savior far away: your Savior is just as present in bread and wine as He was behind that curtain in the temple. I mention this because so many Christians believe that this is just a symbolic drama, that the meal is just bread and wine, not Jesus' body and blood. If that is so, then the communion which takes place is only the gathering of people with each other, not with God. And if it is only a gathering of people, it only makes sense to gather all people present, not ask some to refrain.

Imagine such thoughts applied to the temple in the Old Testament. Imagine the high priest declaring, "The LORD isn't really behind the curtain. This sacrifice and blood aren't really necessary, but only a nice symbol. This Day of Atonement is really about us being together. So go ahead, whoever you are, and look behind the curtain for yourself." You can immediately see the error and the danger: the one who casually entered God's presence unprepared would receive God's terrible wrath. Just about anyone can see how foolish this situation would be, because Holy God was there, and something holy was happening there.

Something holy happens here, too. Your Holy Savior comes to you, giving you His very body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. To believe this is to be prepared: that is the confession of hope to which you hold without wavering, because it is what Jesus tells you. To enter into God's presence while insisting He isn't there would be foolhardy; yet that is what many do when they declare that the Meal is bread and wine, nothing more. To invite such forward would be to contribute to their judgment; and we are here to love our neighbor, not do them harm.

Something holy happens here. It is unfortunate that there are so many misunderstandings and false teachings about the Supper, but we should not be surprised

that the devil will focus his attacks on the greatest gifts of God. I must confess that I sometimes think of this Supper with more worry about controversy than thankfulness for God's presence and grace: in that, too, the devil delights. So we return to what our Lord is doing in His Supper.

He gathers us into His presence: not once a year, but as often as we eat this bread and drink this cup.

He does not shun us because of our sin, but rather has given us this meal in order to forgive us for all of our sins.

And where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.

That is your hope. The Lord Jesus Christ, who died on the cross and rose again for you, is present in this Meal for you—for the forgiveness of sins. Therefore, beloved in the Lord, "let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful" (Heb 10:22-23).

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen