

What makes Holy Communion so extraordinary is that Jesus' words are connected to it. Jesus' words make the Sacrament an eating and drinking through which God graciously gives us all the blessings that Jesus won for us. Without Jesus' words, the bread remains bread, and the wine remains wine. But with Jesus' words, when we eat the bread and drink the wine in a natural way, we eat and drink Jesus' body and blood in a supernatural way. The bread and wine don't just represent Jesus' body and blood; they don't just symbolize his body and blood, or make us think of them. They are his body and blood. How remarkable is that? How incredible? How extraordinary? God's love is revealed to us in this extraordinary meal.

Which leaves one more question to be asked: What good does it do to eat Jesus' real body and drink his real blood in the Sacrament? What benefit is there for us? It is this: Holy Communion connects us to Jesus and to the forgiveness of our sins in a very personal way. The outward preaching of God's Word can be misunderstood or doubted. Some might say, "I can see how God would forgive others, but I find it hard to believe that he forgives me." To one degree or another, if we're open and transparent about our lives, we all struggle with sin—both our original sin and our actual sins—and the guilt and shame that so quickly come and that last for so long. In Communion Jesus comes to each of us individually. He invites each of us to eat his body and drink his blood, the very purchase price of our salvation. To each of us he says, "Take and eat; this is my body given *for you*." "Take and drink, this is my blood poured out *for you* for the forgiveness of sins." Who of us doesn't long for that? Who of us doesn't need that?

My friends, our God is an extraordinary God. He takes the ordinary and does the extraordinary with it. The Apostle Paul puts it this way: *"God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things and the despised things—and that things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one can boast before him" (1 Cor 1:27-29).* God reveals his love in ordinary events, as well as in extraordinary events. Who would have thought that he would connect his Son's body to bread and his blood to wine? Who would have thought that he would choose such a simple way—such an ordinary way—to bestow on us such extraordinary gifts, like the forgiveness of our sins and eternal life in heaven? But he does. His Word makes all things possible. In Naaman's case he said, "Wash." To you and me he says, "Eat and drink." In both cases, in fact, in all cases, he says, "Believe." May we always take our God at his Word, believe what he says, and be healed. Amen.

### Mark 14:12-16 – *Love Is a Four-Letter Word*

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Extraordinary: Beyond what is ordinary or usual; highly unusual; exceptional, remarkable.

Using this definition, the Old Testament Scriptures are filled with accounts of some truly extraordinary men. Names that come to mind are Abraham, whom we call "the father of the faithful"; Moses, who served as a picture of our Great Prophet Jesus; and Daniel of lion's den fame. In 2 Kings we meet another such extraordinary man by the name of Naaman, who was a great general in the mighty army of Syria about 850 B.C. Naaman led the Syrian army at a time when Syria was a force to be reckoned with, for it was a world power.

This extraordinary man, however, was afflicted with an extraordinary disease. He was a leper. At its best, leprosy punched a one-way ticket to banishment in a leper colony; at its worst, it meant a lonely, lingering, painful, and prolonged march toward death.

At the suggestion of an ordinary slave girl, the extraordinary Naaman, with his extraordinary disease, went to the ordinary house of the ordinary prophet, Elisha, who lived in the ordinary country of Israel. This extraordinary general came with many extraordinary gifts—gold, silver, and clothing—all to impress the ordinary Elisha.

But, much to his surprise, the prophet wouldn't even speak to him. Through his servant, Elisha told Naaman to go and wash in the waters of the Jordan River. This mighty general, from the powerful country of Syria, which contained the renowned Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, was to go and wash where? In the muddy waters of the creek called the Jordan? Wash in that? Where were the ceremonies and the incantations of this magic man of Israel? Where were the pomp and pageantry to which Naaman was accustomed and to which he felt he was entitled? He went off in a huff and very nearly missed his chance at being healed. It's only because he listened to his servants that Naaman was miraculously made whole, for Scripture says, *"Naaman's servants told him, 'My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, wouldn't you have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed!' So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy" (2 Kgs 5:14).*

God's extraordinary love for Naaman was revealed in a short, ordinary word: *wash*. So also today, God's extraordinary love for us is revealed in two short, ordinary words, *eat and drink*. My friends, whatever the time and whatever the circumstances:

### **God's Love Is a Four-Letter Word**

- 1. It's revealed in ordinary events.**
- 2. It's revealed in extraordinary events.**

1. I wonder sometimes if the disciples were a bit bored with the seeming ordinary events of the first Maundy Thursday evening. Certainly the ease with which they fell asleep later in the Garden of Gethsemane—not once, not twice, but three times, and all this despite the fact that Jesus urged them to stay awake and chided them when they didn't—would seem to indicate that they saw nothing out of the ordinary in what was happening that Thursday evening.

They were celebrating the ancient Passover in an upstairs room in Jerusalem. Jesus washed their feet, which was a bit unusual, but, then, he always seemed to be doing things like that. He broke the bread and shared the cup with them, but he'd done that before. What had he said about the bread? *"This is my body."* And about the cup? *"This is my blood of the covenant."* Curious, certainly, but not extraordinary. Jesus said many things that evening that they didn't fully understand, but that was often the case with Jesus. And that business with Judas? Judas always seemed to be on the short end of Jesus' stick. Betray Jesus? To whom? For what? Why?

My point is that, all by themselves, without the advantage of historical perspective, the events of the first Maundy Thursday evening seem to be pretty ordinary, don't they? It's only because we can look back some 2000 years that we can see how extraordinary Jesus' words and actions were. Had the disciples not gone to the cross on Good Friday and visited the open and empty tomb on Easter Sunday, the miracle of the Maundy Thursday meal would have been lost on them. All of this Maundy Thursday talking and doing seemed so unimportant, so typical, so ordinary—at the time.

Today we come to Jesus' table and, to be honest with you, it all seems so ordinary. We've done this before, haven't we? We've heard Jesus' words and knelt at this rail countless times before—in fact, for many of us just this past weekend. On the surface, nothing earth-shaking is happening and, from the feel of it, nothing extraordinary is going on inside of us when we eat the bread and drink the wine.

So the question begs asking: Is this all there is? Is this meal just a warm, fuzzy remembrance of something that happened two millennia ago? Is it merely an ordinary reenactment of an ancient event meant to make us feel good? Or, to look at it from a different point of view, can this meal of bread and wine really bring us the presence of the Son of God? Can it really forgive our sins, strengthen the weakness of our faith, empower us for godly living, and increase our hold on heaven? In short, is this ordinary meal of bread and wine a means by which God reveals his extraordinary love for us?

2. To answer this question, I take you where I take our eighth grade confirmands, to the first part of Holy Communion in the catechism, where we ask, *"What is the Sacrament of Holy Communion?"* With Martin Luther we answer, *"It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, together with the bread and wine, instituted by Christ, for us Christians to eat and to drink."* We then ask, *"Where is this written?"* and, going to Scripture, we say, *"The holy evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and the Apostle Paul tell us, 'Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night he was betrayed, took bread; and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, and said, 'Take and eat; this is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' Then he took the cup, gave thanks, gave it to them, and said, 'Drink from it, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.'"*

The answer to our question, then, is yes, yes, a thousand times yes. This Maundy Thursday meal, in which we eat ordinary unleavened bread and drink ordinary grape wine, is one in which we, in a very miraculous way, a supernatural way, an extraordinary way, eat and drink the very body and blood of Jesus. It's this Real Presence of Jesus that makes the Sacrament of Holy Communion a means by which God bestows his grace on us. It's visible and tangible evidence of his love for us. And who of us doesn't long for that?

How remarkable! How incredible! How extraordinary! God reveals his love to us in the miraculous meal of the Lord's Supper. And when we, in our sinful nature and in the weakness of our faith, ask, *"How can eating and drinking do such great things?"* we answer with Luther, *"It is certainly not the eating and drinking that does such things, but the words 'Given' and 'poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins.' These words are the main thing in this sacrament, along with the eating and drinking. And whoever believes these words has what they plainly say, the forgiveness of sins."*