

March 2, 2005
Midweek Lent Service 3
Leviticus 1:1-9; 3:6-11
Pastor Ott

We See Jesus Giving Us Fellowship With God

A man pulls his car to a stop. He puts it in park. He turns off the engine and the lights. He turns to the side and looks at a house that he is in front of. He looks through the picture window in the front and sees a woman, a teenage girl, and another man enjoying a meal. The woman used to be his wife. The girl is his daughter. And now there is a new man in the family, a different husband. The house used to be his house, but it's not any longer.

This scene comes from a movie, but it's not hard to picture the pain that a person would feel in that setting—to be outside looking in at what once was your life now being lived by someone else. That kind of pain and that kind of agony of being separated, being outside looking in.

The Lord speaks to us this evening about another family. A family that we never have to worry about leaving us or causing us pain, because the family he is talking about is how he makes us a part of his family. As our family member, our God will never desert us. He teaches us this truth by pointing us to another meal—a meal that pictured the oneness between God and his people. The word that God used for that oneness, the word that we use for that oneness, is fellowship. In the regulations for the fellowship offering, which became a fellowship meal, and for the burnt offering, we see Jesus as we peer into these ceremonial laws. Maybe you have read these before as you have read through the bible and you thought, “What has this got to do with anything in my life?” Hopefully this evening you will see. Because as we look at it and we look into those shadows of these ceremonial laws, we see Jesus bringing us into fellowship with God. That's what these offerings and this meal were all about. We see first of all as we look at the fellowship offering that because of Jesus, the Lord welcomes us as members of his family. And then secondly this evening as we look at the burnt offering, we see that because of Jesus, in response to what he has done for us, we dedicate our lives to the Lord.

Everywhere Lutherans get together they eat. It's not just here. It's not just people around here. I have talked to some of my friends that are missionaries in Africa and in different places in the world. When they have gotten together with their family members in their congregation, they eat. It might not all be hot dish. It might not all be soup. It might not all be sandwiches. It might have names that we can't pronounce and tastes that we might not like, but all around the world, Lutherans and all Christians get together to eat together. It really shouldn't surprise us. That's really what we see the Lord teaching his Old Testament people to do as he gives them the regulations surrounding the fellowship offering. What we see is, because of Jesus in this offering, the Lord welcomes us.

The fellowship offering is the second one that was read in our text this evening. A person was to bring this as an offering, and they were to bring it to the Lord. After he killed the animal, the priest would butcher it and he took certain parts—what God described as the choice parts. In the case of the sheep that we read about, it was kidneys, liver, fat and fatty tailbone. God called them the choicest part of the animal. And they were to be for him. We are told, *The priest shall burn them on the altar as food, an offering made to the Lord by fire.* Here is the direction that God gave to his people. Take these parts and put them on the altar as food for the Lord. The Lord didn't tie a bib on and grab a knife and fork and come down and eat these up. They were burned up completely. God doesn't need food. But this was his portion of the meal. This is what he was teaching them. And the other part of the animal would then be prepared and eaten by the priests that served in the tabernacle and the people that brought the sacrifice. Normally it was supposed to be eaten the same day. It's not like they could go throw it in the freezer.

Think of what that meal would have looked like. A whole lamb they were eating together. The parts that were talked about, they aren't the parts you and I would be fighting over to eat. Think of the rest of it that they had there to eat. At times, the offering was a whole cow. Think of that feast! And they would be there within the courtyard eating together. But the picture is, God's food is on the altar being consumed and they were eating, so they were eating a meal together to express that they are one with God—that God welcomes them to this meal.

The surprising thing about it is by all rights, God shouldn't welcome anyone to a meal, because everyone is a sinner and God hates sin. That's why once again we read that section that should be getting familiar during our midweek services now about the ceremony of blood. Isn't that sounding familiar? The guy that brings the offering has to place his hand on the animal signifying his sins are put on it. And then when it's butchered, some of the blood is taken and sprinkled here and rubbed there to show that you cannot approach God on your own terms. God has to act so that you can approach him, and God has to cover your sin with blood.

Those actions were symbols, familiar. In every one of these offerings, that same thing is being done. You can see how time after time after time his people are being taught that to enter God's house, you must be perfect. No animal you bring can make you perfect. God has to act to make you perfect.

But in this meal, what they would see is God saying this blood makes you okay to enter in. And God throws the door open and invites you to come in and sit down and eat with him. You are welcome! You are not on the outside looking in through a plate glass window. He was saying to his people, you're at the table with me.

What an incredible picture that is—God welcoming people to be one with him. Those people needed the blood of the lamb that was promised. That gave power to all that blood that was rubbed and sprinkled and smeared. You and I need the blood of that lamb also, because we are born separated from God. We are born not wanting to let God have control of us. We are born hating him. And even after God brings us the gift of faith and gives us that new self that wants to be with God—that delights in eating a

meal with our Lord—you and I still have a sinful nature. And that sinful nature exerts itself at times and wants to be controlling. It wants to control people around us. You know how that is at times when we want things done a certain way and then we don't get it that way. We huff and we puff and we stomp or we slouch or we do something. We might say we will go along with it. But our body language is screaming, "You're an idiot because you are not listening to me". Does sinful nature ever do that?

We have got that inside of us. We don't want to let God have control of our lives. So we go our own way and say "I don't care what you think, Lord". So we need the blood of the perfect lamb to cover us. And Jesus' blood does cover us. It does wash away our sins. We were baptized into his death so that now we are welcomed into God's house.

Each and every time, if you walk up the middle steps in the back of our church to come sit in church, and you look toward the altar, you are looking through your baptism—where your sins were washed away—where you were covered with the blood of the perfect lamb that forgives you so that you can approach God and come into his house.

This fellowship meal that God gave to his people was also to teach them that they were going to be one with God not only in time, but for eternity. Because Isaiah really applies this fellowship meal in Chapter 25 and says, *On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines.* What he was talking about was Judgment Day. Through the fellowship meal, God assured them, you are one with me and you will be coming to that banquet because of the blood of the one who will be shed that takes away your sins. And by God's grace you and I will partake of that eternal feast that is eternal life with God in heaven.

But the fellowship meal doesn't only point ahead to the banquet of heaven, the feast of heaven as it is often depicted in scripture. It points ahead to another feast that you and I enjoy. Because when Paul was talking to the Corinthians about the Lord's Supper and he was talking about how *is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? And is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ?* He reminded them that considered the people of Israel. *Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar?* He is talking about the fellowship offering, the fellowship meal. He is really telling us that it points ahead to what we would enjoy when we come to the Lord's Supper, because in the Lord's Supper, we have this oneness with God that goes beyond our understanding. Because it is a oneness that is physical and spiritual. It's physical in that in, with, and under the bread and wine, we receive the very body and blood that was poured out and that was shed to take away our sins. It's spiritual in that God gives us the gift of the forgiveness of sins.

Every time we come to the Lord's altar, whether it's here, or whether it's in the pew, or whether it's in our homes, or in a hospital room, the Lord sets aside the sin that separates us and brings us into his presence. We aren't outside looking in and wishing we could be a part of God's fellowship. We are sons of God, heirs of everlasting life, served by him and welcomed by him.

You look at that kind of love and it is just amazing. We don't deserve it. We could never earn it. And yet God loves us with that kind of love. How can we respond to it? Paul lays it out pretty clearly for us in Romans 12. He says, *"Therefore, I urge you brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship."*

The season of Lent is a time for solemn reflection on the passion or the suffering of Jesus. But that's not all it is. It is also a time for commitment. We talked about the instructions in the beginning of Lent of rededicating ourselves to the disciplines of Lent. Committing ourselves to God and refocusing on also living for him. When the gospel reaches down, it changes us. It changes our lives. That truth is what the other sacrifice we look at tonight really taught. The burnt offering taught the Israelites and teaches us that we are to dedicate our entire lives to the Lord because of the love God has shown us in Jesus. That's what we see in the shadow of the fellowship offering.

What do you think would happen tonight if after the musical offering is over and the offerings of money, these gifts have been collected and they are brought up to the front, instead of turning around and placing them on that altar, what if I invited everyone to stand up and follow me and led you all out into the front yard of the church where I had a grill set up? And then very carefully and very ceremoniously arranged those offerings on that grill and then torched them. What would happen? I am betting the Treasurer or the Financial Secretary would probably try to tackle me, wouldn't they?

Do you think other people would be saying, "What a waste. "How could the person do such a thing? That's just incredibly foolish. That's incredibly stupid. Who would ever do such a thing with offerings to God?" But did you listen to the text about the burnt offering? Isn't that exactly what God did? He told them, "bring me a bull". Remember it had to be a bull without blemish or defect. It wasn't what you wanted to get rid of. It was the best. Bring it to him. And then it will be butchered and it will be cut up and it will be arranged on the altar. But even before they put it on the altar, did you notice they had to wash the inner parts and the thigh so that this isn't a bloody mess? You've got to have this clean and prepare it. You have to clean it so that you can burn it up completely.

What in the world was God teaching them? Do you think some of the people that brought this offering did it out of obligation and looked at it and kind of shook their head mentally and said "What a waste"? Do you think some pious people said "This should have been slaughtered and we could have fed the priests who serve in God's house for a week! And now we are just going to burn it up?"

What in the world was God teaching them? He was teaching them to dedicate their whole lives to God. Not just think they're dedicating and giving something to God because God needs it. God didn't need their animal offerings to balance his budget or to feed his priests. He would see to it that that was done. He didn't need this. But he did it so that they would learn to give their entire self to God just as that entire offering was burned up.

When we give our gift to the Lord, whether it's our talents, our time or our treasure, I think too often the devil gets us to fall in the trap of thinking we are doing something for a congregation, for a budget, we are meeting a need, it's a necessity, we are behind so we better give more. God doesn't want us to think that way. He wants us to think in the sense that we are giving our entire selves to God. This offering is just a small token. Remember, the Israelites, even though they gave that whole bull and that burnt offering, they also were asked by God to give a tenth of all their income. But that isn't what he wanted. He wanted their entire being. What he wants from us isn't just the time we use or the treasure we give. He wants every single thought, every single word, every single action in your entire life to glorify him. That's what he wants. He was teaching the Israelites to do that by burning this entire offering.

But notice again like every other burnt offering they did, every other sacrifice they made, that ceremony of blood had to be there again. Because even if they would devote their entire life to God, that wouldn't be enough. They couldn't do it perfectly. So the blood had to be collected and poured and sprinkled. The hand had to be placed on the head to show that this would make atonement for them. You and I can offer to God our very best, and it's not going to be good enough. By all rights, God should take anything that you and I offer to him, spit on it and then send us on our way to hell because it's not good enough. It cannot make him love us. And you think about it. The very nature at times of how we give offerings or how we give our time, we think if others were doing this, think of how much better it would be. And we think God then must love us more than them because we are doing more than them. And we've completely perverted what God tells us to do in our offerings, which is to show him love and not pull our shoulder out of its socket patting ourselves on the back. It shows the very nature of how sinful we are.

But God doesn't look at the offerings we give through the lens of who we are and what we are. When he looks at us, he doesn't see our self-centeredness or our false work righteousness. Instead, he sees Jesus. He sees the blood of the lamb that has covered us and now it makes that offering that we give to him, that word of encouragement that we speak to others, that offering we give out of complete and absolute thrilling joy that God loved us first—he sees that as perfect in God's eyes because of who Jesus is and what he has done.

Because he does that, we rejoice to give our entire life to him. We might not do it perfectly. But we work and we ask God to help us to get better because we want to thank him for what he has done. Because when it comes down to sitting at that table, we are not outside looking in through a plate glass window. We are there at the table. And God is with us!

This evening I was sitting in my office looking over the sermon. I could hear everyone laughing in the basement and talking. I thought about getting up and shutting the door so I could concentrate a little better. But all of a sudden I noticed it got quiet downstairs, and I looked at my watch and thought I better get my gown on—I'm late. It's not unusual that we as Christians can laugh and rejoice with one another and laugh as we come up to God's house to worship, because we have the joy of knowing that we are

welcomed by God! We belong at the table! We are loved! So we respond by serving him in joy!