

HEARTBEATS- Staying Connected 10/15/2021

Dear Friends in Christ,

The Lutheran Church teaches that there are two sacraments: Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. The Roman Catholic church has seven sacraments. Luther taught that there are three requirements for a sacrament. First, it has to be commanded by Christ. Second, there has to be a visible sign—something you can see and touch or taste. Third, there has to be what Luther called “the means of grace,” or the announcement of the forgiveness of sins.

Holy Baptism was commanded by Jesus when He told His followers in Matthew 28:19 that we are to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Jesus commanded Holy Communion in Mark 14:22-25, Luke 22:18-20, and Paul repeated it in I Corinthians 11:23-25 where Jesus, in sharing the Lord’s Supper with His disciples said, “Do this in remembrance of Me.” The visible signs, obviously, in Holy Baptism is water, and in Holy Communion are bread and wine. And the means of grace in Baptism is given first in Acts 2:38 where Peter tells the crowd on Pentecost, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.” The means of grace in Holy Communion comes in Jesus’ own words at the Last Supper, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sins.”

These three requirements are helpful for making the distinction for Lutherans as to what is a sacrament. It is not to say that the Roman Catholics are wrong, but five of their sacraments, confession and forgiveness, confirmation, holy orders (ordination as a priest or a nun), marriage, and the last rites don’t meet these standards as far as Lutherans are concerned. Nowhere does Jesus command that we should be married or ordained. And while an argument could be made that He does follow some actions supporting confession and marriage, He never commands these, nor does He with regard to the last rites. There is a visible sign in marriage (the ring), ordination (the stole for pastors), and the last rites (oil for anointing), but not in confession nor confirmation. Both confession and forgiveness and the last rites include the forgiveness of sins, but confirmation, marriage, and ordination do not. (Sometimes I think marriage even causes more sin.) Additionally, neither marriage nor ordination are available to all as not everyone finds a marriage partner, and many do not feel the call to holy orders. As gifts from God, the sacraments should be available to all.

These three requirements help to set the sacraments apart from other things we do in church. And while practices like prayer, offering, confirmation, confession, and others are helpful for faith development, they don’t carry that special benefit that we feel in the sacraments. We are blessed to have these two important gifts from God that remind us of God’s forgiveness that comes to us through faith in Christ Jesus.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey